







# Twins for the Enemy

**Author:** *Vitina Rose*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** She's the woman I swore to hate—and the only one I ever wanted to be mine.

They say life can change in an instant.

Farah Todd changed mine the night she rear ended my car.

Gorgeous. Shaken. And too demanding for a girl who just slammed her Honda into my Mercedes-Benz.

She begged me not to call for help, then went limp in my arms.

So I kept my word, and took her to my mansion.

She woke up in my bed. Unharmed. Tempting as sin. And asked me to be her first.

I knew it was reckless.

I knew she was half my age.

And I knew I couldn't stop myself from having her.

It was supposed to be one night with a stranger.

But I've been chasing the memory of it—and her—ever since.

Because that was months ago.

The same night she slipped away without a word.

Before I found out what she was running from and why I should hate her.

Now, I've tracked down the one woman I can never forgive or forget.

Hungry. Hiding. Still so damn beautiful it hurts.

And pregnant—with my twins.

Twins for the Enemy is a high-heat, enemies-to-lovers standalone with forced proximity, accidental twins, and a billionaire who can't

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

## Chapter one

~FARAH~

Running from a burning building and fleeing a crime scene wasn't exactly how I pictured my night going.

The smell of smoke is deep in my clothes. I run my palms over my shirt like the scent can be wiped away.

My hands tighten on the wheel as the police sirens get closer. I check my rearview mirror. My heart nearly stops as I see a white SUV. But as it turns onto a side street, I see it doesn't have the blue stripe or Chicago Police sprawled across it.

I let out a slow breath and look forward again. The brake lights in front of me flare, and I slam the pedal, but my tires skid over rain-slicked asphalt. I barely register the back of the other car before I plow into it.

The impact jerks my car violently sideways.

My world becomes a symphony of scraping metal and shattering glass. Pain lingers at the edges of my mind. The glass shards seem to be suspended in front of me, moving at the same rate that I am as my car is hurled into the air. I should scream. I should be panicked. But my mind can only come up with one thought: Oh.

The passenger window explodes, and glass bursts up at me like a violent fountain at the same time that the side airbags deploy. The screeching of the car as it slides

against the asphalt reverberates in my ears even after it stops, and the seatbelt cuts into my shoulder as it keeps me dangling in my seat.

Pain courses through my arm, but as I raise it, the pain doesn't get any worse. I'd take it as a sign that it's not broken, but adrenaline could work as a better narcotic than any street drug.

Everything sounds like it's underwater. The crash must have overwhelmed my hearing. I fumble for the buckle of the seatbelt, the shards of glass biting into my hand. I need to check on the other driver. I brace my foot against the center console, preparing to fall to the passenger side.

I stop, turning as I hear a small popping noise. I watch the side airbags deflate. The shadow of a broad-bodied person appears on the other side, cutting away at the airbag.

"Are you okay?" a voice asks.

My vision is swimming when I get my first view of the man. My car is compact, but he still must be over six feet tall, considering I can see him peering over the width of the vehicle to see me in the wreckage. "You came out of nowhere."

"I'm so sorry about that," I mutter, my voice barely audible to me. I raise it, almost yelling, "I'm sorry! I don't know what happened."

My eyes start to clear, and I realize that I'm talking to a man who could sell every bridge in Chicago.

A halo of dark sky is around his head, but even at night, his face could con any woman or man into investing in a blatant scam. It's not that it exudes trustworthiness—the unruly black hair and the stubble indicate more of a devil-may-

care attitude—but the concern creasing his forehead and the softness in his dark eyes are enough to make me feel safe. This man is a stranger, but he could tell me that I need to buy the Michigan Avenue Bridge to save all of the orphans in Chicago, and I'd believe him.

"Miss? Are you okay?" he asks again.

I realize that my hands are gripping the wheel so tight that my fingers seem unwilling to loosen.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm, uh, I'm doing great. How are you?"

"Well, I didn't plan on testing the safety rating on my vehicle today, but here we are. Take my hand."

It seems preposterous. He'd need to pull me straight out like I'm a potato chip in a bag, but the alternative is falling into a pile of glass.

This was a sign that I should've turned myself in. I'm not resilient enough for a life on the run. I'm not even strong enough to get out of my own car right now.

I look back at the man. He has his phone out.

Like I'm possessed by the worst basketball player on this side of the Mississippi, I smack the phone out of his grip.

"Don't," I say. "Don't call the police."

"It's okay," he reassures me, disappearing from my view as he picks up his phone. "I was calling for an ambulance. They need to check you over."

"No, I'm fine," I insist. "Don't call."

He reaches over the car, leaning against it to grasp my hand. He slightly turns it, looking at where a burn is already blistering. I wait for him to ask about it. Nothing in the car is burning.

"Can you unbuckle yourself?" he asks. "I'll pull you out."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I grapple for the seatbelt's buckle. I repeatedly press down on it, but the seatbelt doesn't release.

"It's stuck," I say, desperation creeping into my voice.

"I'll get it."

Still grasping my hand, he uses his other to pull out a pocketknife and flick it open. I lean back into the seat while he saws into the seatbelt. The back of his hand rubs against my chest.

Heat rushes into my cheeks. I focus on the windshield, which is amazingly still intact considering how easily it gets chips in it from rocks. There are five hundred more important things for me to focus on right now than this man.

As soon as the seatbelt snaps away, he lifts me up. A pain shoots through my arm, but before I can think too much about it, he sets me on the car door and slides me into his arms. Cradled into his chest, my back leaning against his forearm, and his other arm holding me under my knees, he walks over toward the sidewalk before setting me down. He keeps a supportive arm around me.

"Don't put too much weight on your legs until you're certain nothing is broken," he says.

It's a soft, kind empathy that almost makes me angry. Nobody is this kind without having an ace up their sleeve. Everything comes with a price.



In my periphery, I see the curtains in someone's window move. Everyone nearby must have heard the crash. If the cops get to me before I get to them, any leverage I may have is gone. I won't be the person who made a mistake and was willing to face the consequences. I'll be the one who was only willing to confess once she was backed into a corner.

"I'm good," I say briskly, brushing away his arm. He hesitantly lets me go. "I have to get going. Thank you for your help."

I take several steps, waiting to feel any pain in my legs, my ankles, or my feet, but I'm feeling surprisingly good. Maybe it's a good sign that I can survive a car crash without any lasting effects. Everything else might be going to hell, but my bones appear to be in good enough shape to deal with slamming into a large-ass car.

I glance over toward his SUV. Huh. It makes sense that his car only has a small dent in the back. In any scenario, my junker versus his Mercedes-Benz ends with his luxury vehicle gliding away to some high-end party while I try to bargain with some junkyard to give me ten bucks for the scrap metal.

With that good of a car, maybe he's a con artist.

It's my last thought before I feel my body cascading toward the ground, and the world fades into darkness.

The snakes are embedded with shards from the wreckage.

Instead of scales, they're covered with the glass from the window, splinters of the mirror, and chips of white paint. I tuck my legs closer to my body, but they're all unfazed by my presence—except for one of them that slinks up to my sneakers. An unfamiliar calm washes over me, and I reach toward the snake. It slithers onto my hand.

I expect the fragments of glass to cut me as it glides between my index finger and my thumb, but it's soft enough that I look closer to see if it's made of velvet and only made to look dangerous. Its beady eye stares back at me, my face reflected over and over in the blackness. It continues to twist around my palm. It doesn't seem to want to strangle my hand, but it's almost like it wants to force me to shed my skin and become renewed. It's a tempting idea—discarding who I am now and not carrying it around for the rest of my life.

The snake starts to tighten around my hand. It looks up at me again. It's starting to turn bright red, so much heat radiating out of its body that it hurts. As it starts to burst into flames, puffs of smoke choking me, it rears its head back and sinks its teeth into the back of my hand.

I jerk awake. My hand still aches, but instead of a snake wrapped around it, there's a white bandage carefully wound around my skin. One end is still dangling loose. My eyes trail down where the bandage wrap hangs, following across to the right of my body, where a pair of knees in black pants are nearly touching my calves. I slowly look up, past the white button-up and the black tie, to the gorgeous man from the crash.

I bring my injured hand closer to my chest, looking around. We're in a bedroom that's much bigger than any bedroom needs to be. The bed I'm in could fit at least four people, the fireplace is large enough for someone to lie down in, and the windows would let in enough sunlight for surgery if it weren't dark outside.

I jerk upward. It's no longer daylight.

"What time is it?" I ask. I pull off the blanket draped over me, pain striking through my hand.

"Nearly 8 o'clock," he says, slowly pulling the blanket back to where it was.

"Why the hell—" I try to toss my legs over the edge of the bed, but he grabs my knees, pushing them back down. My father was once arrested over a bar fight. They'd tracked him back to our house, and he'd admitted to attacking the man when the police arrived. The lawyer told him it may have helped his case if he'd gone to the police right away, but since he'd waited until they'd built their case and shown up with handcuffs, his confession was just the final nail in his coffin.

I don't want a nail in my coffin. I don't want the legal system thinking I'm some monster who only repented once I was trapped in a corner.

"Stop moving so much." He puts his hand on my shoulder, applying enough pressure that I lean back onto my elbows.

"What is going on?" I ask. "Are you keeping me prisoner here?"

He smirks at me. "Do I look like a prison warden?"

I swallow hard. "None that I've seen. But kidnappers can look like anything."

"I knew by the look of you that you'd be an optimist," he teases. "Can I finish bandaging your hand? If not for that burn, pretend to do it to serve my controlling nature."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"Controlling like a kidnapper," I grumble. I eye the door. I could tell him to screw himself and just leave, but his kindness has been like a forest fire, where I can experience its warmth, but I'm wary of any oncoming danger. And Lord knows I've put myself in danger enough times tonight.

What's one more?

I offer him my bandaged hand. He takes it, just as gently as when I thought he was a velvet snake.

"So, what happened that you don't want the police called?" he asks, coiling the wrap around my wrist. I wonder if he can see my pulse as his fingertips graze above it. My breathing is shallow. I need to focus on something else. I glance to the right of him. A night table has a leather pouch on it. I pick it up with my other hand. It's soft from being handled so often. Something square and with a decent heft is inside it.

"Are you always so difficult?"

I slide a finger into the pouch, wiggling it enough to open it wider. When I can slide in two fingers, I push them inside, widening the bag enough to make a hole the size of a quarter. The man tucks the end of the wrap underneath where it encircles my wrist. He quickly grabs the bag, jerking it hard enough that the object falls out onto my lap.

It appears to be an antique. It's a heavy brass box with a thick clasp. With both of my hands free, I flip up the clasp and open it.

It's a compass. It's much less elegant than the exterior, but the needle is engraved with a kraken.

"It's pretty," I say. "Was it your father's?"

"It could have been my father's if he started having children when he was in his 80s." He pauses. "It's from the 1910s."

"So, just one of those things that rich people buy to show how cultured they are?"

"Oh, I don't want people to think I'm cultured." He smiles. My heart beats harder. "They might want to talk to me about Russia's October Revolution or neoclassical economics."

"You seem to be talking a lot now," I say, running my fingers over the circular glass of the compass. It's less about its smooth texture and more about giving my hands something to touch that isn't him.

"And you do seem to enjoy being difficult."

"Only when I'm around difficult men."

He shrugs. "It seems a shame to change because of the people around you."

My jaw tightens. It shouldn't hurt my feelings—he's just joking around—but he cut to the core that I'm so easy to read.

I shove the compass back into its pouch. "That seems like a natural thing to me."

He tilts his head, watching me. "You should know... if you're running from an abusive situation, I know some charities that can help. You don't need to deal with it

on your own."

I stare down at the pouch. I never considered he'd think I was fleeing from a situation where I was a victim. Maybe he can't read me that easily.

"I don't—" I stop. "Why would you think that?"

"You mumbled the name Neal a few times," he says. "You didn't say it in a happy way. You sounded like you were angry at him."

I press my lips tightly together. I've been trying to keep the memories at the edges of my mind, but they're pushing through now. I remember Neal's dry hands as I dragged him out of the building. I remember Neal telling us that we need to go our separate ways to confuse the police. I remember seeing my old boss, our eyes meeting as he stood on the other side of the street. I remember I forced myself into my car and drove straight into this infuriating man.

I need to call Neal. I need to check on him. I check my pockets. My phone must be in the car. They would've taken it off the road by now.

I'll turn myself in. I owe Neal that. They won't dig any further since my boss saw me, and he'll gladly throw me under the bus. It's not like I'd planned anything for my life—no dreams of a family, a career, or trips to Bali. You can't throw away a future that is less solid than smoke.

"You have the same bruise as me," the man remarks, touching along my clavicle. I glance down. The seatbelt left a noticeable mark there, but more than that I can feel the heat of his fingertips left on me. I want to keep his hand there, spread it out, and feel it over my chest. I want him to press down, to push in, to give me new skin just like that snake.

Once I turn myself in, I'll be a virgin into my late twenties or maybe my thirties. When I finally get out and start dating, I'll have to tell men I've never had sex. They'll question why. I'll have to tell them the truth—arson, prison, the usual reasons—or I'll have to lie, and then a halfway decent relationship would start with a lie. At some point, I'd have to be honest, and if I'm ever capable of being that open and vulnerable, I'd prefer my moment of honesty wasn't based on whether I've gotten naked with a man.

I reach over, my hand touching the side of his face. I kiss him, softly, a question.

And he answers. My God, does he answer.

Chapter two

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

~KIERAN~

The moment I saw her in the car, I knew I had to keep her safe.

And after she was safe, I had to have her.

Her lips brush against mine, almost clumsy in their tenderness. They brush against my lips again. Her hand moves down to my shoulder. I kiss her back, harsher than her, but she responds with the same intensity. Our lips collide—like thoughts or cars or bodies. The compass clatters to the floor.

I nip at her bottom lip, surprising her enough that her body flinches under my palms. A small sound escapes from her throat that strikes a desperation in me that I've never felt before.

I've never been the desperate type. When I walk into a negotiation, I come with leverage, sharp words if needed, and I'm not afraid to show teeth. If a deal falls through, I move on. No drama.

Women are the same to me. It's not that I don't respect them, but I've never needed them. They're a momentary pleasure, meant to be savored, devoured, then left behind like a good meal when it's done.

But as this woman kisses me, desperation rises in every nerve of my body. I'm at the negotiation table now, willing to give up anything.

She's too young for me. I'm not one of those men who need a younger woman to feel



youthful. Youth is a time for mistakes. I don't have time to make mistakes, and I don't have time for someone else's.

Still, I don't pull away because the taste and warmth of her mouth pulls me closer. Her kisses are small, almost timid, but she's clinging to me in a way that's more demanding than a military captain. Her full breasts push against my chest. I push back against her, pressing her back into the mattress. My fingers sink into her hair. I'd seen it as simply blonde before, but it's much more radiant than that. It's the golden shade of a sunrise, giving off a warm glow.

Her back arches. The gesture is enough to send a feral hunger through me—not like a man who could eat steak every night, but an animal that hasn't eaten in days.

Her breath is in my ear as I unbutton her jeans. She slides an inch up the bed as I tug on them. She grips the edges of the mattress so I can get them past her ass before whipping them off and casting them aside.

I run my hand up her calf, her knee, her thigh. Her underwear is a plain black cotton pair that's starting to fray at the edges. When I brush my hand on the inside of her thigh, a shiver passes through her.

I lean over to kiss her again and feel her hands fumble with my belt. After several seconds of her struggling to get the leather out of the buckle, I take it, unbuckle it, and toss it in with her jeans. She bites her bottom lip, indenting it, and starts working on my zipper. The lip bite is usually meant to look sexy, and it does with her, but it's not a purposeful sexiness that I've seen with other women. She seems to be concentrating, unaware of her own facial expressions.

After some minor issues with the zipper, she's struggling even more with the button. Sweat, like tiny diamonds, starts to glitter on her forehead.

She's biting her lip so hard now, I'm worried about bloodshed.

I take her hands just as she undoes the button. They're trembling.

"If you've never slept with a stranger before, it's okay," I reassure her. "I don't know most of the people I've slept with, and it's the same mechanics as when you know somebody. You just run the risk of finding out that they're unstable afterward and you need to get a restraining order."

"Oh, it's... it's not the part where you're a stranger," she says. "That is... unexpected, though. And I don't think that last bit is helpful."

"See, you know me already. Unexpected and unhelpful."

She snorts, but she still looks like she's expected to perform surgery. I'm so goddamn hard, I'd rather fuck her than talk, but I was both blessed and cursed with two sisters, and I know I'd tear out the throat of any man that didn't notice their discomfort.

"I'll just let you rest," I say, standing up and ignoring the strain in my pants. "Do you need anything? A drink? Food?"

"No, don't go," she says, taking my hand. Her hands feel impossibly small compared to mine. "I'm just nervous because—I've never done this before."

"Had sex with a stranger?"

"No. Well, yes. But I haven't slept with anyone that I know either. I've been... a lot's been going on in my life."

I smirk, waiting for her to laugh or at least smile, but her expression is more of a challenge than stand-up comedy.

“Every man in the city must be trying to get a chance with you.” I slowly move a piece of blonde hair away from her eyes. “Is it for religious reasons?”

"No," she flushes. "I've never had a boyfriend. Like you said, I can be difficult. Maybe men don't like that."

"I never said I didn't like it." I turn to zip my pants. My cock is so fucking hard, every move feels like death. "I'll let you rest."

"Wait." She grabs my arm. "I didn't say I didn't want to do this."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"I'm not the right person," I say, the words coming out more forceful than I intended. I need to convince myself of them too, and stubborn fuckers can be difficult to sway. "I'm not someone you want to be with for your first time. Sex isn't an act of roses and sweet nothings to me. It's just a moment when two people let go of their formalities and let their primal side take control."

She lets out a huff of breath. "I'm not looking for the right person, and even if I was, I can decide who is the right person for me."

"Not when you're unfamiliar with the process," I counter, but I make the mistake of looking at her.

Her green-brown eyes remind me of a kind of soft wilderness—untamed, but gentle—and her lips are a twist of ribbon that I'd love to unravel. I want to keep that flush in her cheeks. I want to bring it out in every other part of her body.

The desire must be raging in my eyes because she reaches up, hooks her hand behind my neck, and pulls me in. She kisses me again. It's a long, drawn-out kiss, her hands sinking into and gripping my hair.

I should pull away.

I should stop kissing her.

I shouldn't be moving back onto the bed with her, mesmerized at the way her small body fits under mine.

I shouldn't ask her name.

I shouldn't let the name "Farah" roll on my tongue and pass it back between her lips.

I shouldn't undress us.

I shouldn't press a kiss under every new inch of her skin I reveal, reveling in the warmth and the scent of her arousal.

I've been with enough women to earn a reputation as a womanizer—or a piece of shit, depending on who you ask—but when I grasp her underwear and her hips rise to give me space to lower them, it feels like lightning in a bottle. It's the first time I've felt something real since Olivia was killed, but instead of death, it's life.

Her hands are trembling as she touches my cheek. It's a reminder that for me, it might feel different, but for her, it's completely new. It should remind me to stop or even show restraint, but when she's touching me, it's gasoline to our fire.

She reaches down, touching me. Her breath hitches.

"Will it hurt?" she breathes. I run my nose over the side of her jaw and the place beneath her ear.

I slide my hand between our bodies, stopping at the warmth of her pussy. I trace her opening, circling around her clit two times before pushing a finger inside her. She's so wet and tight, my head spirals.

Her tongue glides against her bottom lip as I feel her chest rise and fall under me. I slip another finger inside her, her arousal coating them.

"It might," I say. "But I'll make it worth it."

She nods once. "Make it worth it."

It's all I need to hear. I press my cock at her entrance.

Be slow. Be gentle.

I look into her eyes. Fire is blazing in them. It makes sense that she smells like smoke. She's combustion.

I push into her. I concentrate on her mouth, continuing my mantra.

Be slow. Be gentle.

But, God—she's fucking perfect—and when her fingers grab onto my back, pulling me closer, the words start to burn. Her back arches. Her mouth is slightly open, soft breaths coming out. I keep a firm grasp on her hip, feeling her body accommodate for my size.

"You good?" I ask.

She blinks at me before her hand moves from my shoulder to the back of my head, pulling me into a kiss.

A growl rumbles in the back of my throat as her insistence breaks my self-control.

My thrusts aren't slow or gentle. I grab her hand from the back of my head, pinning it to the bed above her as I fuck her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

An abnormal anger builds inside me, seething at this woman who's made me lose control, but it's kept at bay by the desperation. I could hate her at another time, but now she has something I need. Now, I couldn't find an ounce of satisfaction without her.

The silk of the sheets makes her body slide until her head is against the headboard. It would appear uncomfortable, but her eyes are lit up, that green shade dancing with vitality. Her hand, still restrained by my grip, claws into the bed.

Her other hand—the burned one—is near her side. I'm tempted to grab it, pin it down too, or flip her over, fuck her in every position I can think of, but a small part of my brain feels the burn on my own skin, worse than I imagine it truly feels. It's another new feeling. I press a kiss in the base of her throat as I grind up against her. Her thighs tighten around me, her knees pressing into my sides. Her eyes squeeze shut as my mouth moves lower, creating a path to her left breast.

Soft. Full. Tipped with a nipple that tightens under my breath.

I wrap my lips around it, suck hard enough to make her gasp, then graze it with my teeth.

She's close to orgasm. I've never prioritized a woman's pleasure—they know their own bodies, they can ride their own way to orgasm—but this is Farah's first sexual experience. Every possessive part of me wants her to remember this as her awakening. The moment her body learned what it means to be mine.

I slide my hands under the small of her back, pressing her closer to me as I grind

slower against her. Her eyes open again and she grasps onto my back, the rough material of the bandage wrap contrasting with the softness of her other hand. I start moving my body faster, the friction against her clit causing her to bite that lip again.

I kiss her, nipping at the same place she bites her own lip. I feel her body tensing, her knees pressing so hard into me that it almost hurts. I return to my reckless thrusting. I bury my face into the curve of her neck, hoping to prevent the stream of curses that are raging to the surface.

"Shit!" she blurts out as her nails dig into me and her pussy contracts so tightly around my cock that it nearly stops me, but with one more thrust, a stream of curses fills the room as I come so hard, it almost knocks me out.

I slip down beside her, my chest heaving. Every breath slows down my heart, but the euphoria is still pulsing through me.

Orgasms always feel good, but this is more than that. It must be the adrenaline from the crash. I may need to start jumping from planes before fucking another woman.

I turn on my side. I pluck a small piece of glass out of her hair, reaching over her to set it aside on the night table.

A gentle smile plays on her lips. "If I'd known that was what happened, I wouldn't have waited so long."

I kiss her. Her lips are slightly chapped now. Her tongue slips out between her lips, wetting them. I kiss her again.

"I'm going to get us some water," I say. "I'll be right back."

"Maybe something sweettoo?" she asks.



"Maybe."

I pull on my briefs and slip out, quickly walking down the hallway. I head downstairs to get to the kitchen and find the collection of strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries that Caleb keeps in the fridge. I dish out two small bowls and fill two glasses of water.

The whole time, I can't shake the feeling of a major shift in my life. I can predict a significant amount of possibilities when it comes to my business because I research the businesses we plan to acquire down to the last detail, and I have enough experience to know when people will push back against any clause or ask for a provision, but I know nothing about this woman, and I've never had this type of experience with anyone.

So, I shouldn't expect anything. But the expectation lingers.

As I walk back up to my room, I plot. I'll make her comfortable enough to stay the night. By morning, I'll know exactly what to do to see if it's worth pursuing this further.

But when I walk into the room, the bed is empty.

I check the attached bathroom. Nothing.

I glance around in the other nearby rooms.

She's gone.

My phone vibrates. For a half-second, I'm relieved, thinking it's her, hiding somewhere in my house, but she doesn't know my number and she didn't have a phone on her.

It's Falke Hospital.

"Hello?" I answer.

Chapter three

~FARAH~

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I turn the compass in my hand, watching the needle tremble before continuing to point north.

"That's fancy," Callie says, plopping down onto the cot beside me. "How much is it worth?"

I close my fist around the compass, the clasp cutting into my palm. "No idea. Not much. It's a cheap prop from a movie set."

"Bo, I know five-year-olds who are better liars than you."

Bo is short for Little Bo-Peep. She gave me the nickname on my second day at the shelter after I witnessed her steal some cigarettes from another woman and I declined to smoke them with her. It's meant as an insult, but it's a better nickname than some of the other women get.

"If you get asked to clean at Richter's again, I wouldn't go," she adds when I don't say anything. "They got police crawling around."

I glance over at her, but her face is unreadable.

Paranoia has dominated my thoughts since I fled from Chicago two months ago, knowing anybody could be an undercover police officer. But with Callie, the paranoia is necessary.

She appears to be like me, where she needs to get paid under the table to avoid any paperwork. I don't know if she's hiding from the police like me, but I won't be

throwing stones from my glass house.

So, it's possible she is being nice to forge a relationship with someone she has common ground with. But she could also be trying to snipe a job from me. We are playing a game of survival of the fittest, and I may not be vicious enough to win.

"Did you steal that compass?" Callie asks.

I flush.

She must be thinking I took it from a job and stumbled on the truth. I shouldn't have taken it before I disappeared. Even when other girls my age were shoplifting and I wanted their approval, I didn't do it. It was too risky, too much like Neal, and I knew the guilt would follow me around.

But as I prepared to leave that man's mansion, I wanted something to remember our time. He had my name. I had his compass.

It turns out that wasn't necessary. Everything reminds me of him. A dim streetlight brings me back to the lamp on his bedside table. Whenever I make a bed, I flatten the creases while I remember how he thrust inside me with such intensity that it caused waves in the blankets. I dream of him at night, and I wake up with my hands pressed between my legs, the ache between them deeper than I can reach.

"I have a new job that I should head out to," I say.

"Just apply to Kitty Den?" She rolls her eyes. "You don't need to be holier than thou. You'll earn more there than you are scrubbing floors."

"This one was a much better deal," I say. "They were willing to pay ten dollars an hour because it's a house they just bought, and they want it to be cleaned up before

they move in."

"Ten dollars an hour?" she snorts. "That's too good to be true. If you get murdered just because you didn't want to suck off some club owner, you're getting exactly what you deserve."

"You'll come to my funeral, though, right?" I tease her, sliding the compass back into its pouch. "You'll make sure I'm cremated? I know you'll find adventurous ways to deal with my ashes."

"Hell yes," she says, a dreamy look crossing over her face. "I'll freeze them into ice cubes and serve you in a cup of iced tea to Kara."

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I always wanted to be a tall drink of water."

She plops back down onto her pillow, burying her face in it. In a way, she reminds me of Neal. The hard outer shell and the biting words, but underneath all of it is someone who is trying to just not get buried under the weight of the world.

I slide on my jacket and shove the pouch inside the pocket. It's all a big joke because we can't take any of it too seriously, or else we'll have to grieve the truth.

We're alone in the world. All those temporary, gasping, trembling connections will disappear, leaving only dreams.

And twin unborn babies.

The front door is open. Even in this small town, it's unusual to be so unconcerned with security, but it's propped open by paint cans, and the buzzing of a power tool echoes through the walls, so it must be part of the owner's renovation efforts.

I knock on the door. If the only person in the house is the person using the power tool, they won't hear me, but I don't want to accidentally become a home intruder. The last thing I need is to be arrested for a crime and for the police to discover that I'm a fugitive.

I take a step in, glancing around to see if there is anybody else around. It's a gorgeous house. The wood flooring is a rich shade of brown with some scuff marks and scarring that give it some character. The exposed beams are stained a similar shade, while the white walls create a sharp contrast with the wood. Soaring ceilings make the house feel even larger without losing any of its intimacy.

My stomach growls, loudly proclaiming that I haven't eaten since 3 o'clock yesterday. I'd had enough money to eat ham sandwiches for lunch and dinner for a couple of weeks, but half of it disappeared to the other women in the shelter, and I had to finish the rest quickly before it molded. If I don't work today, I won't eat, so persistence is my only weapon.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

No one answers. It looks like I'll be adding trespassing to my list of crimes.

I take a few careful steps inside, stopping at the center of the entryway.

"Hello?" I call out.

I listen. The buzzing is too loud to determine which direction it's coming from, but on the threshold to the room on the right, I notice a trail of sawdust. I follow it like it's rose petals. With the amount, I half-expect to find a tree at the end of it.

But instead of a tree, I find a man.

A tree of a man, sure, with his height and broad shoulders. His back is turned toward me, bent over as he uses a table saw. He's not wearing a shirt, the muscles in his back flexing as he holds the wood steady.

My heart beats faster. I imagine my hands tracing along his shoulder blades. I imagine his hand off that piece of wood and cupping between my legs.

Do pregnancy hormones hit this early?

I knock on the wall, not wanting to interrupt his work. My hand is lightly trembling. It must be from the hunger.

He doesn't respond. I need to catch his eye.

I slowly move around the room, staying far enough away that if he strikes out

because he thinks I'm an intruder, I'm out of range. It's a skill I learned from growing up around my father—if you can't stay invisible, stay beyond their reach.

When I see his face, it's like plunging down on a rollercoaster—my thoughts whipping around, my stomach flipping, and a mix of fear and excitement flooding my bloodstream.

His hand moves slowly, pressing down on a large red button. The saw turns off. He jostles his dark hair, sawdust falling out of it.

"Oh," I say. "I didn't know it was you. It was... you never told me your name."

Kieran Ragdon. When I'd first heard it, I'd assumed he'd be some rich asshole. I didn't expect it to be the man who carefully wrapped my hand and took my virginity in a way that blurred the line between aggression and security.

"The rate was ten dollars an hour, right?" he asks.

I furrow my brow. I can't tell if he recognizes me or not. What are the chances it was a coincidence?

"Yeah," I say. "That sounds good."

"Under the table," he says.

"Yes."

He's gazing at me, his expression cold. I run my fingers through my hair. I never thought I was that beautiful, but since I've been on the run for two months, I feel like I was dragged through a dumpster. My hair keeps getting in tangles, which gives it a wheat-like texture. Deep shadows press under my eyes, making me look much older



than twenty-two, and the cracked lips don't help.

It's completely possible he doesn't recognize me. I'm not sure I would recognize me. I changed from a young adult to a ruined runaway.

"Is there a reason for that?" he asks. "You'd make much better money doing legitimate work."

I shrug. "It's complicated."

"Almost as complicated as your name. Jessica Smalls," he says.

He rubs his shoulder. As the shock wears off, I take in his body. I'd been so overwhelmed the first time we slept together that I didn't fully appreciate it. A swimmer's body—bulky, but only with muscle.

"Are you related to Ambrose Smalls?"

"Uh, no," I say. "I have no idea who that is."

"Are you sure?" he asks. "He lives in Chicago."

"I've never been to Chicago," I say firmly. "Small-town girl. Hate the city. Do you have a preference for which room I should start with?"

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"The bedroom," he says. "It will be the perfect starting point. Close enough to the front door that you can sneak out."

I stop, my hand freezing in my hair as I try to get the knots out. "You do remember me. How did you find me?"

"Private investigators," he says.

There is a missing weight to his words, like he's keeping a few words tucked away to keep the scales even. He must be. I haven't used any credit cards and only used burner phones, so it's hard to believe there isn't more involved. I could demand more answers, but the result is the same regardless.

"Why?" I ask. "Why would you track me down?"

"A bigger question is why you're doing a job that requires you to use toxic chemicals," he says. "It's reckless and irresponsible."

"I can decide what's good or not good for me—"

"I'm not talking about your free will." He glances down at my abdomen. "I'm talking about the health of the twins."

One of my knees buckles. He lurches forward to catch me, grasping my arm to steady me. Heat rushes through me. I slowly stand up straight, pulling my arm away.

"How do—how do you know about that?" I ask.

"Private investigators," he repeats. "You should have told me."

I stare at him. "They're not yours."

"Whose are they?"

"John. My boyfriend."

"John Doe?" he asks. "It's perfectly timed when we slept together. When you were a virgin."

"I slept with someone after you. I mean, I slept with John. We met right after." I force a smile. "It was better with him. Less abrupt. More romantic."

"Interesting that for the qualities you listed, you didn't mention his skill." He tilts his head. "Disappointment? Or imagination?"

"John is real," I say firmly. "He works as—as a painter."

"You saw the paint cans outside?" he asks. "Well, tell John that you're coming back to Chicago with me. I need to know my children are getting the best care."

I scowl, crossing my arms over my chest. My stomach growls again, loud enough for him to hear. He doesn't react. It stings.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I say. "I have a life here."

"Do you?" he asks. "Or is it just a life where you think the police won't find you? I have enough influence to ensure you get charged with attempted murder for the woman you injured during the Bettiol fire."

The blood drains from my face. "How do you know about that?"

"Everyone knows in Chicago. Next time, I'd suggest you don't hurt a pretty woman. They tend to get significant screen time."

"What happened to you?" I hiss. "You were so nice when we first met. Now, you're threatening me?"

"Yes."

I anxiously brush my fingers through my hair. My left hand gets stuck in the knots.

"You're a whole lake of assholes, aren't you?" I ask.

"Nah. More like a fast-moving stream—doesn't look that dangerous till you're drowning in it," he says. "I have my plane waiting for us. You can come with me or wait for the police to come and arrest you."

The night we'd met, his eyes reminded me of dark roast coffee, the warmth spreading throughout me. Now, they're cold and, from a distance, black.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I look down at the table saw. The blade glints from the light through the window. He must have bought this house to set me up. There are no coincidences, just consequences, and I'm about to suffer through mine.

"I'll come," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "But if you expect us to become a loving family, you're sorely mistaken."

"I don't expect that. Nor do I want it."

His voice is sharp, slicing through me like the table saw cut through the wood. Deeply, with precision, and without needing to consider my past of living through natural disasters. He knows he can carve through me with the right tools.

I follow him out of the room. I can survive this too. He'll regret uprooting me and trying to turn me into another plank of wood.

Chapter four

~KIERAN~

For the first twenty minutes, Farah pretends to be disinterested in my plane, but as we approach a half hour, her eyes start to sneak in looks. She rubs her palm against the white leather chair as she looks over at the wooden table between us and the large-screen TV behind me.

Her stomach continues to growl.

Some people might call it karma. I'm not into sadism, but some people's misfortune creates a bed of satisfaction. It's good to see people get what they deserve.

She still looks gorgeous, which is harming my judgment to an infuriating level. I need to keep a tight hold on the rage I'd been feeling toward her for the last two months. I need to think of Ellie's burned skin instead of the rosiness to Farah's cheeks that make her appear perpetually wonderstruck. I need to think of how Ellie's hands had been trembling when I reached her at the hospital instead of how Farah's hands have this tiny bone structure that makes me want to encase them to protect them. I need to think about how I slept with Farah while Ellie was being carried out of the fire Farah started, condemning me as a selfish brother and her as a sociopath.

She's carbon monoxide, which can cause suffocation and catastrophic fires, but it can also cause delusions. It will make you so high that the poison looks like an elixir.

I've always gotten what I wanted by being direct—making the threat obvious, letting people see exactly what they're up against. But I'm starting to realize her way works just as well, maybe better. Maybe the ones who don't make noise are the ones who get closest before they strike.

"Tell me about the Bettiol fire," I say, grabbing onto my drink. I'd poured her some juice, but she's ignored it. "Your boss told the police that he fired you because you were stealing."

She continues to look past me, focusing on the TV. "I wasn't stealing."

"If somebody falsely accused me, then fired me, I'd burn down their business."

She glares at me but doesn't say anything.

"You can't pretend you weren't angry," I say. "I saw the surveillance footage."

Her eyes widen, and her shoulders tense. "There was surveillance footage of the fire?"

Tension courses through my own body. She's already trying to build her legal defense.

"No," I say. "I was talking about surveillance footage of you being fired. Were you worried that your boss hadn't turned off the surveillance cameras for the night and caught you? The police don't need it. They have motive, they have witnesses, and they have surveillance footage of the nearby restaurant, which you ran past. The court case should be quick and brutal."

She looks out the window. Clouds are layered so thick underneath us that it resembles snow clinging onto rocky terrain.

Part of me had been waiting for her to explain away all that evidence—her burned hand, and her refusing to go to the hospital after she crashed into me. It's not for any sympathy or affection toward her, but because I've never been so completely fooled by anyone. Considering her complete and utter disinterest in denying it, it appears that I'm not as good of a judge of character as I thought.

"The news stopped reporting about Helena Porter," she says. "Have you heard anything else about her? Is she doing okay?"

I try to keep my anger from flaring on my face, but she must see it in her periphery as she nervously glances at me.

I could tell her the truth, but she doesn't deserve to know. I also don't need her to know how deep my hate is and how she should have run when she first saw me. I'll wait out the next seven months, and once the twins are born, I'll send her to prison. It'll be a fitting gift to Ellie as she begins the next stage of her life.

"Never mind," she murmurs. "I'll find out on my own."

Those soft wilderness eyes are trying to look at me in defiance, but it makes her look more like an injured fawn. It should trigger my kill instinct, but aggravatingly, it makes me consider all of the predators who'd prey on her and what I'll need to do to keep her safe.

It's because of the twins. Paternal instinct.

I take out my phone, avoiding those eyes. Seventy-four new emails. But even the ones about acquisitions seem trivial.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"I've already started the process of getting the twins into one of the best private schools in the country," I say, sliding my phone back into my pocket. "It will be more difficult to get two children in, but they've been floating the idea of a new music building with a recital and concert hall. Allegedly, there is a difference between the two. They also want fifty practice rooms—"

"The children aren't going to a private school," she says coldly.

I stare at her. "Why wouldn't you want our children to get the best education available?"

"They're not our—" she stops, her jaw clenching. "I don't want my children only exposed to wealthy, pretentious children who only care about who's wearing brand names and who knows the most celebrities. I want them exposed to people from other walks of life."

"That's ridiculous." I take a gulp of my drink. "Do you know what happens in public schools?"

"Yes," she says. "Do you?"

"Yes. I went to eight of them. You'd get a better education in a crack den."

I trace the rim of my glass. "Speaking of degenerates, what happened to my compass? The one you stole?"

"I sold it," she says. "When you're poor, fifty dollars goes a long way."

I rub the side of my face, my scruff scratching against my palm. "It was worth far more than fifty dollars."

She shrugs. "Oh, well."

I take another swig. She glances over at me, a mix of apprehension and confusion creasing her forehead. She clearly expected me to be angrier. I should be angrier. But I must have tipped the scales so far into rage that I find her nonchalance amusing.

I'm entertained by a woman I want to ruin. This must be whatinsanity is.

My house was built by an oil baron, who'd had eight children, three wives, countless mistresses, and a strong predilection for iron, granite, and marble. Once we drive past the iron-wrought gates, Farah's eyes follow up the three stories. With the two turrets framing the center of the mansion and the roof spires, it must look like a castle, but with the massive windows and the exterior grand staircase, it lacks the sense of security that a castle has.

With technology, it became less necessary. With power, it became irrelevant.

"You look like you've never seen my house before," I say.

"I didn't see the outside until I was leaving," she says. "And I was in a bit of a rush."

"Because you thought I would chase after you?"

"Let's not act like I was being melodramatic," she says. "You did track me down two months later."

"Fair."

She's quiet as I park, and we walk into the house. My head of staff, Bernard, opens the doors when we're a few feet away, a rush of warm air hitting against us. She steps closer to me, looking around at the foyer, but after we step inside, she steps away again.

Yes, an injured fawn, but one that's determined to not appear frightened by its predicament.

She looks at the sweeping staircase, which hugs along the wall. Two railings, forged out of metal to form intricate patterns, flow up along its width. It always seemed a bit too feminine for my tastes, but Ellie was horrified at the idea of me demolishing it. She kept talking about future nieces and nephews riding laundry baskets down it, so I let it remain.

Now, seeing Farah look up at it, I can imagine little feet running down it or playing with toys on one of its spacious steps.

I can also imagine Farah, sleepily walking down with a soft smile—or a dress pulled up to her waist as I fuck her against it.

My attempts to keep my rage at the forefront of my mind aren't working.

"Let me show you your room," I say, indicating up the staircase.

I start walking up them, not waiting to see if she follows, but as the stairs turn, I can see her in the edges of my vision, remaining nearly five feet behind me. She keeps looking around her, taking in the mansion with amazement and disgust. I see her mouth a few words that almost look like profanity.

I slow my steps as we pass by the rooms, and she sneaks a glance into each one. Once we reach the end of the hall, I gesture into the room.

"This will be your room," I say. "It's secure and it has a view over the stream."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"I'm surprised you care about what I have for a view," she says. "I was under the impression that you hoped I'd suffer for the rest of my life."

"I don't care," I say. "But if you're constantly under distress, the twins will be too. Unfortunately, with the nature of human anatomy, my children are inside you. If they weren't, you'd be sleeping in a closet."

"You go to all of the feminist meetings, don't you?" she asks.

"I go to them at the same time as you go to the meetings for mental stability." I nod toward the window. "Check out the river. Tell me the view isn't gorgeous."

She doesn't say anything, but she walks over to the window and peers out. Her shoulders relax as she looks out.

I take a quick step back and close the door. I'd had a lock installed on the outside right before I left to get her, shaped like a compass decal just in case she noticed it. I hear her hurried steps as I turn the needle of the compass, locking it. The doorknob jiggles as she tries to twist and turn it, then shakes as she becomes more frantic.

"Let me out!" she yells. "What are you doing? Let me out! You can't do this. Shit!"

She starts banging on the door. I stare at the lock. Her whining only makes me think of how panicked Ellie must have been during the fire. This is nothing. There is no immediate danger to her. She can't see any black smoke filling the room or feel the heat of a fire getting too hot to deal with. This is child's play compared to what she did to Ellie.

"Please!" she says, panic and sadness creeping into her voice. Even the banging on the door sounds less confident. I take in sharp breaths, almost feeling claustrophobic. I close my eyes. I only want to take care of her because of the twins. I can't let her sway me that easily.

I reach for the lock.

I let my hand drop, pivoting and walking back down the hallway. It's not until I'm partway down the stairs that I stop hearing her. Her voice echoes in my head, as insistent as a desire to breathe.

## Chapter five

~FARAH~

I've twisted the doorknob and rammed my shoulder into the door enough times that my hand is cramping and my shoulder aches. I rub deep into my palm, trying to think.

When my father would lock me in my room, the four walls seemed to close in on me. I thought it was because I had a smaller room, but this room is immense, and it feels the same.

I comb my fingers through my hair, feeling the hint of dampness from sweat. The claustrophobia was one of my fears about prison. I can deal with temporarily being in small spaces, but I don't know if I could deal with it day after day. But here I am, trapped. And for what? For disappearing on Kieran?

I'd deserve it for running from the fire without checking for anyone still inside, but there is no reason for this man to care that deeply about that. If he's willing to blackmail and lock me in a room, morality isn't a huge hurdle for him.

I need to escape. I am not my father's daughter, crying for salvation and waiting for Neal to intervene to save me. I will never let a man treat me like a criminal while he's just a different kind of monster.

And if he's going to treat me like a prisoner, I'm going to act like one.

I strip off the blankets from the bed. As I tie them end to end, I know it won't be long enough. I take the curtain rods off and add them to the makeshift rope. With the king-size sheets and ten curtains, I'm fairly confident I'll be able to reach the ground.

Two armchairs sit, angled toward each other, in the corner of the room with two windows behind them. I test the weight of the chair. It's heavy enough that I can barely lift it off the floor. I pull the rope underneath it, then tie the end to one of the curtain rods. It should be a decent anchor.

I swing the other end of the rope out the window. I watch it flutter down, an unnerving reminder of how far I could fall.

I twist the sheets around my palm, considering keeping it that way. If I slip, it might prevent me from falling. As I look at the white on my palm, the memory of Kieran wrapping up my burned hand slams into my thoughts. He'd been so kind that night. I must have met Dr. Jekyll, and Mr. Hyde is here to remind me that if it seemed too good to be true, then it was.

I step onto the window ledge, slowly turning myself around as I keep a tight grip on the rope. I press the tip of my shoe against the exterior wall. It slips against the granite. The soles of my shoes are nearly flat from overuse; they'll never be able to grip onto the side of this mansion.

"I'd assumed you'd wait at least a day before trying to throw yourself out the window."

I nearly fall right out, but my tight grip on the sheets stops me from becoming a pregnant pancake. I spin around. Kieran is standing below the window. He gives me a short wave. I scowl down at him.

"You think too highly of your hospitality skills if you couldn't tell that I'd try to escape as quickly as possible."

He shrugs. "And you think too lowly of me to think I wouldn't know what you would try. I'd prefer it if you didn't do it. For the twins' sake."

I glare down at him, but as the ocean in my brain slows down into calmer waters, I know he's right. It isn't worth the risk. I'd listened to my panic instead of reason. I rub my face, angry at myself for not coming up with a better plan. I shouldn't have walked over to the window when he asked me to look at the stream. I'd clung to some idea that he'd still be kind to me like the world's biggest fool.

Isn't that what my father said about me? That I'd filled my head with fairytales when reality kept showing me that it was cruel and unforgiving. My current situation proves that.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I look back out the window. Kieran is gone.

I pull the sheets back inside and slam the window shut. I plop down in one of the armchairs. Hunched over, I start untying the knots in my makeshift rope, cursing myself and that man with every movement.

I thought I was a person who would do whatever it took to survive, but having these babies changes the direction of the compass needle. North isn't survival. It's ensuring the best thing for my children. Maybe that's escaping. Maybe it's giving all of myself over to a heartless man who wants me to suffer because I turned him into a one-night stand.

As I work on the last knot in my pile of sheets and curtains, I hear footsteps that are brief but heavy. Someone who isn't small, but isn't careless or lazy with their movements. I consider running to the door and slamming it shut, but after getting caught already, it wouldn't surprise me at all if he beat me to the door.

Then, what would happen? I'm not under any delusion of how much power he has over me right now. If he wanted to assault me, he could. I couldn't run to the police. I could run to Neal, but while Neal would make a big show of protecting me, Kieran could break Neal faster than he could break me. It's not that I'm more resilient than Neal, but Kieran evidently cares about our children. As long as I'm pregnant, I have some level of protection.

After that, I have no idea what he'll do to me. I don't plan to find out.

He steps on the threshold, leaning against the doorway. The intensity of his

expression makes me feel like he can see all the pieces of myself that I've hidden away. But if that's true, then he'd know what happened during the fire, and I can't allow that to happen. I look down, pulling the last knot free.

I flinch at a loud thud. I look up to see he's thrown a hammer and an array of nails between the two of us.

"You're going to nail shut the windows," he says.

I feel my lip curl up in a snarl. "And what will you do if I don't?"

He strides over, easily sidestepping the hammer and nails, and kneels down in front of me. For most people, kneeling in front of someone would be an act of subservience, but with the way he looks at me, there is no doubt that I'm not the one in control. His hand rests on my knee. I think of jerking it away, but I don't know what he'll do next. I don't know if I'm intimidated by the thought or excited by it. My thudding heart doesn't seem certain either.

"If you don't, I have another room in mind that doesn't have any windows at all and is only large enough to hold a small cot," he says, his voice eerily calm. "It also doesn't have a thermostat in it. I gave you this room because I wanted the mother of my children to be comfortable. But if she's a threat to those children, I'll choose their safety over her comfort."

I glare at him. "I'm not a threat to them. I would never hurt them."

"Prove it." He swivels around, grabbing the hammer and two nails in one quick movement, and places them on my lap. "Prioritize them."

I could use the hammer to bash against his head. I could run out of here. I glance down at his legs. I can't see them under his pants, but from our night together, I'm

fairly certain he could outrun me, even if I had a head start. But if I hit him hard enough...

"I should tell you that I know the Chicago Superintendent of Police. The police buy tactical gear from one of my companies, so whenever we're at the same charity events, he reminds me that if I ever need a favor, he'll gladly do it for me. If I tell him that some woman stole from me—say, an expensive compass—I'd have the whole police force to track that woman down."

"Do you think he'd still feel that way if he knew you were holding a woman captive?" I ask.

He smirks. "You must not be familiar with our justice system if you think a billionaire philanthropist would be questioned over a fugitive who tried to commit murder."

I lurch forward, so our faces are barely an inch apart.

"I didn't try to commit murder," I bite out. "What kind of man tries to flaunt how his wealth makes him seem more innocent than he is?"

"This isn't a question of innocence, but you aren't winning that battle either."

His eyes flick up and down my body. "No matter how naive and harmless you appear."

His eyes linger on my lips longer than the rest of my body. When he looks back into my eyes, my breaths are so shallow that I feel lightheaded. He picks up the hammer, still settled on my lap, and his thumb brushes against my thigh. My hands jerk slightly, almost ready to press his hand closer, but I grab onto the hammer, enclosing his hand under mine.

Our eyes are locked and my thoughts slip away like small wisps of air. I want his mouth on my mouth. I want to feel the strength of his tongue against my tongue. I don't care about right or smart. I just want what makes me feel alive.

His expression darkens, and he slowly pulls his hand away. The hammer almost falls, but I snatch it before it can. The nails still scatter on the floor. Our heads nearly hit as I scramble to pick them up. As soon as I've gathered two, I turn my back to him and head to the window furthest away from him. I use the hammer carefully, unfamiliar with the mechanics of how to not smash my own thumb.

As I'm distracted, I hear hammering. I turn to see him quickly nailing a different window shut. I try to work faster, but by the time I'm done, he's finished the other nine windows.

"I have something else for you too," he says, moving back toward the door.

I expect him to slam it shut—some sick joke about giving me privacy or a room—but instead, he picks up some folded clothes from outside the door and places them on my bed.

"They're my clothes, so they'll be too big for you, but it's better than nothing. The cleaning staff changes the hamper in your bathroom once a week."

He grabs the hammer and heads back to the door, grabbing onto it to close it.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"Nailing the windows closed and locking me in is a fire hazard," I say.

His jaw clenches, and I realize my mistake.

"It's ironic for you to care about that," he says.

We both must be thinking about Helena Porter and the reports of her severe burns on her face. He shuts the door quietly, but it would have been less threatening if he'd slammed it. I listen to the faint sliding sound as he locks it.

I sit down on the bed, turning on the stone-base lamp. I try to lift the lamp. It's quite heavy. If I wanted to break something, this would be the right tool for the job.

And I definitely want to break something.

The mattress of the bed is heavier than hell, but I manage to slowly slide it off by switching between heaving it with my arms and bracing myself against the wall and pushing it with my legs. I plan to struggle through dismantling the bed frame, but it's kept together with simple brackets. I only need something to loosen the screws.

I search through the bathroom, finding an array of possible items—tweezers, nail clippers with a metal nail file, and a toothbrush. The toothbrush is useless now, but if I keep my prisoner mindset, I can sharpen it like a shank and turn it into something that can twist a screw.

The tweezers are more durable than I expect, but they keep skipping out of the groove in the screw. I switch to the nail file. It skips out as well, but with the grit on it, it

grips better. I slowly manage to get each screw out, creating a pile of the rails and slats.

When the door opens, I'm looking down at a small mark where I'd tried to turn the nail clippers too hard, it slipped out of the groove and stabbed the side of my hand. It's small, but I hide my hand under my thigh as Kieran steps in anyway.

He glances at my disassembled bed frame, the mattress haphazardly leaning against the bedside table, and me, looking like I just ran through a humid jungle. His mouth moves the slightest bit, which could be annoyance or amusement. He's become much harder to read since our first meeting. Or maybe I hadn't tried to read him that night.

"It's time for dinner," he says. "Let's go."

"I'm not hungry," I say.

It's the biggest lie I've ever said. I haven't eaten since yesterday, which seems like years ago now. I've gotten used to some hunger, but it's gotten to the point that I'm sure my stomach is consuming its own lining. But I won't let him think I owe him for anything. I'll starve.

"You can choose to not eat for yourself, but you need to eat for the twins."

I flip the lever on the nail clippers, back and forth, like windshield wipers. The asshole is right. Even when I went to the clinic, I only confirmed that I was pregnant and found out it was twins. I didn't dive too deep into the details because it all felt like a dream. It would have been ridiculous to ask how much I needed to eat anyway. I was already barely eating enough to feed myself. I can't imagine how much weight I'd lost in the last two months.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Kieran isn't so kind to me anymore because I lost the

weight that made my feminine features more noticeable. Maybe he only liked me when he found me attractive.

It shouldn't affect me, but he'd turned me into someone who could feel more than responsibility and regret that night. He'd made me feel like a whole person instead of someone who needed to be molded into someone useful. I could feel joy without any strings attached.

I slowly stand up. I slide the nail clippers in my pocket.

"Leave them," he says. "I'll tell the staff to take them and anything else with a sharp edge."

"Afraid I'll jab it in your neck?" I ask, raising my eyebrows and trying to look innocent.

"I'm worried that you'll injure yourself. I saw the nick on your hand," he says.

I shove my hands into my pocket. Reluctantly, I take out the left one and drop the nail clippers on the floor.

As I pass him, his eyes follow me. Looking for more weapons, I assume.

Part of me feels ugly about it. The other part is secretly pleased.

If I can't be desirable, at least I can be a threat.

The dinner spread is like an offering to a god.

Kieran pulls out a chair for me. As I sit down, it takes a moment to drag my attention away from the steak, glistening with juices under the bright lights as the dollop of

butter melts over it. But it's not the only food there.

A bowl filled with fluffy dinner rolls with steam rolling off them.

A small bowl of caramelized carrots.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

A plate with a stuffed pepper on it, the melted cheese turning crisp over the edges.

A small bowl of lemon-colored risotto.

A salad with a mix of almonds, bits of bacon, feta, and berries.

With the feast, a glass of water, and a few dishes I don't recognize. If this is an offering to me, I am more than satisfied.

"Your steak is cooked medium well," Kieran says. "The chef also made sure the truffle butter's fresh."

"Do you eat like this every night?" I ask, my mouth watering.

"No. I tell the cook what I want, and he cooks it," he says. "I wanted to be sure you'd want something here, so I asked for a variety of dishes."

He has no idea how hungry I am. I'd eat fried ants at this point.

"I didn't know you were capable of caring," I say.

He looks at me, impassive. "I knew there was a good chance you'd refuse to eat, so I adjusted the variables to ensure our children were taken care of."

I should have known he'd claim it was because he'd read me so easily. I swallow the saliva gathering in my mouth. I don't want to appear too eager. I'll wait until he eats.

But as he sits down, I realize there is no plate for him.

"You're not eating?" I ask.

"No."

He's being an asshole, again. And I'm almost too hungry to care.

I can hold out for a second longer.

Two seconds longer.

Three seconds—

I snatch up one of the dinner rolls, biting into it so quickly that my teeth clash against each other. But the pain doesn't register because the roll melts in my mouth, the salt in the butter triggering shock and comfort to my taste buds. Before I can register it, I've finished the roll and started on another one.

Kieran stretches out in the chair, all relaxed dominance, his fingers tapping against his thigh while he studies me. I don't notice how intensely he's observing me until after I've cut into the steak and finished two succulent bites.

Why?

Is he mocking the way I'm eating like some kind of starved animal?

Is he waiting for some kind of poison to knock me out?

Is he trying to intimidate me?

Well, I'm not going to let him unnerve me.

I lean forward to blatantly stare back at him, slowly continuing to sneak food in without breaking eye contact. He doesn't flinch or back down. I'd gotten used to seeing his eyes as a dark void, but being this close, I don't see the void or the warmth I saw the night he took my virginity. The dark circle around his iris seems to fade into a shade of mahogany brown, but like the wood, darker lines of brown mix with the lighter shade, creating a vibrancy I've never noticed in anyone else.

The spoon hits my mouth a little too low. Some of the risotto spills on my lap.

"Oh, crap," I mutter, dropping the spoon on my plate. I search for a napkin, but I can't see any past all of the food. Kieran plucks one from behind the dinner rolls. I snatch it out of his hand. If he touches me right now, I may lose all sense of self-respect. I quickly wipe the risotto off my pants.

"It looks like you'll have to change into the clothes I gave you sooner than later," he says. "It looks like you changed your mind about eating too."

"It's fine," I mumble. "I'd have eaten any kind of food the same way."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

"Oh?" he asks. "You must have considered prison food at this point. Do you think you'd have enjoyed it just as much?"

"Sure," I say. "Bread is bread."

"That's good to know. It's still an option for you."

I glare at him. Never mind. His eyes are still a dark void. They look like wood because there is nothing behind them. Unconsciously, I shove another bite into my mouth.

"If you shove any more in your mouth, you're going to choke," he says.

I tear apart the bread, shoving as much as I can in my mouth. It's likely the unsexiest visual he's ever witnessed. It shouldn't bother me that he might see me that way.

"Do you use that mouth on John?"

Heat rushes into my cheeks. "Who's John?"

"The man you claim is the father of your children."

"Oh, um, right, yes," I say. "I mean, no, I don't use my mouth—well, I do, but that's none of your business."

"Very convincing. Award-winning," he says, fixated on my mouth. I swallow.

"Are you going to blackmail me into sleeping with you?" I ask. A darkness eclipses his eyes, taking away any light in them. But he forces on a smirk.

"You must have forgotten that you were the one who pressured me into sleeping with you last time," he says. "So, if you're looking for a predator, it's you."

"Bullshit," I say, setting down the rest of my bread roll. "I didn't pressure you to sleep with me."

"It wasn't that long ago." He leans back in his chair. "You must remember me telling you that we shouldn't do it. You insisted. You kissed me after I said we should stop."

"You're wrong." I force myself to smile back. "I only slept with you because I wanted to steal from you. It was the quickest way to get your defenses down."

He runs his thumb along the edge of his jaw. "You told me that you sold the compass for fifty dollars. You're lowballing your virginity."

"You're an asshole," I spit out, jerking up to my feet. "I'd rather go to prison than spend one more second here with you."

As I turn, nudging the chair back with my leg, he grabs my wrist.

It's like experiencing touch for the first time. He's keeping his grasp at a firm but not tight grip, and it still feels abrasive—almost like my skin is brand new. But it doesn't scare me. It makes me want to feel brand new on every part of my body.

"If you go to prison," he says, his thumb rubbing along the center of my wrist, "the twins will be at the whim of the prison healthcare system. Then, I'll get full custody of them once they're born. Is that what you want?"

I slowly sit back down. He releases my wrist. I smile at him, the aggravating, sociopathic dark void in my life.

"Thank you," I say. "I'm glad to have someone around who is aware of the state of our prisons. It must be why you're such a good captor."

"If I was acting as your captor, you'd be in a much worse situation." He leans his elbow on the table, cupping his chin in his hand. "I'm acting as a father to our children."

"Funny. You are a lot like my father," I say.

His forehead creases for a moment. My gut clenches. I don't deserve sympathy for my father. He barely ever hit me.

"If your father hurt you—" he starts, his hand clenching into a fist.

I grip onto the bowl of risotto, but it doesn't seem as appealing now. "My father is irrelevant."

"No woman deserves to deal with that."

"Does a woman deserve to be held captive in a house by a stranger?"

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

His face hardens again. "Does a woman deserve to suffocate on smoke and have her face burned?"

I fling the risotto. It spatters all over Kieran's chest, creating a lemony cascade down his shirt. He looks down at it. When he looks back at me, there's no anger in his face. Just slight surprise.

But I still realize I've made a huge mistake as he starts unbuttoning his shirt.

"Do you need to do that?" I ask.

"It has olive oil and butter in it. I may be a man, but I can still get that those two ingredients don't come out."

I'm getting used to seeing him shirtless, but my heart immediately starts thrumming throughout my wholebody. It's not just the muscles and tone, but the memory of how it felt against me—the heat, the weight, and the way his body moved with mine, the ocean waves crashing down on the shoreline.

When I look back at his face, the hunger in his eyes makes my appetite look small. But God, do I want to cater to him.

He leans closer to me. My hands are trembling. Hot breath. Dark eyes. Lips slightly parted.

Faint bells chime. As Kieran pulls away, looking around, I realize it's not in my head.

“Kieran!” a woman’s voice calls out. It sounds like she’s coming from the foyer.  
“Are you here?”

“Excuse me,” Kieran says, standing up. “Keep eating. I need to deal with this.”

As I watch him walk away, I imagine another woman sinking her nails into his shoulder blades like I did. I imagine her calling his name—actually knowing his name when they have sex—and how it’d echo through this house louder than it does when she’s calling him now.

I take a sip of my water. This doesn’t seem like a feast for a god anymore. It’s a meal to keep the humans placated while the gods take everything from them.

Even the fire they originally gave them.

Chapter six

~KIERAN~

Seeing my sister is always a glacier of emotions. On the surface, it’s good to see her. She’s the last piece of me that’s not corrupted by greed, rage, or arrogance.

But underneath that, the fury is worse than ever. It’s my job to keep her safe. Two months ago, I would’ve sworn on my life I’d have done anything to do it. I would’ve said it was the most important responsibility in my life.

Then Farah literally crashed into my life, and I’d forgotten all about her. I let my responsibility to her slip between my fingers. It’s not Farah’s fault that I allowed myself to be distracted.

It is her fault for causing the fire that injured Ellie.



“Hello, Kee-kee,” she says, smiling. Nobody would ever be able to tell that she’s my sister. She has long blonde hair, folded into two braids, with a body that’s thin enough that it seems unsafe for her to live in the Windy City. One strong gust and she’s drifting away to the Atlantic Ocean. She wraps her skinny arms around me and kisses my cheek. “Why are you shirtless? Were you flexing for someone?”

With her face so close to mine, I can see the white scars on the left side of her face. Dr. Bartkowski had done an extraordinary job after the burns, turning her immense pain into faint cobwebs along the edge of her face.

Even with the expert hands of a surgeon hiding her pain, I can’t let her know that Farah is here. Ellie can do yoga and meditation all day long, but it’s significantly more difficult to forgive when the arsonist isn’t a phantom that vanished in the night.

I have the opposite problem—where it was easier to hate her when she was a phantom. But she’s soft, supple flesh and bone, creating chaos in my head.

I tell myself to stop and I go. I tell myself to go and I stop. I tell myself to keep my distance, and I gravitate around her like a goddamn moon.

“Kieran?” she asks. “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m doing good,” I say. “I am curious if you’re here so late to rob me or kill me.”

She rolls her eyes. “I wouldn’t need to come over late at night to kill you. I could do it in broad daylight, and a million businessmen would come out and applaud me.”

“Only a million? I thought I’d broken into at least three million at this point.”

“They’d send me gift baskets.” She beams at me. It pulls a bit at the scarring near her eye, but if you didn’t know about it, it would just look like some glitter. “I had some

mini replicas made of the buildings Henry designed. It's going to be a surprise for the engagement party, but I can't let him find them at our apartment, so I stored them on the shelf in your library."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

The engagement party. The engagement party that is going to be here. In my house. Where Farah is.

What a fucker of a brother I am.

“You just need to make sure Henry doesn’t go up there.” She bounces on the balls of her feet. “He’s coming by tomorrow with those big, oversized prints for the party—which includes that photo of the two of us at that club, where you were with that redhead, but we cut her out, we were certain you wouldn’t mind—”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, so I don’t mind.”

“But you know, he and I think the same, so he might try to store the prints in the same place. Don’t let him. Tell him a group of wild cats peed up there or something.”

She crinkles her nose at her own joke. It’s a mystery to me how she remains so lighthearted when the world has been so cruel to her.

“Helena,” I say. “I don’t—”

“Oh. My. God.” She huffs. “Do not call me that. You can tell my parents hated me because the second I was born, they gave me the name of a ninety-year-old woman. Not even a fun ninety-year-old woman, but the kind who yells at her husband who died twenty years ago.”

I shake my head. “Fine. Ellie. What about having the engagement party at The Calson? With a large enough donation, they’d shut their doors for us.”

“No.” She fixes the strap on her shoulder. “We’re having it here.”

“What about that place on Lake Michigan that you liked? The one with the translucent floor.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Kieran, why are you trying to change the venue? Are you trying to hide something? Is there... a guest here? Is that why you don’t have a shirt on?”

Elliespins around like she might find someone lurking behind her. Evidently, there is only a marble floor.

She spins back around, grinning.

“I don’t hear a denial. This is amazing,” she gushes. “After what happened, you were so depressed. I thought—”

“I wasn’t depressed.”

“Kieran, you’re forty-one and I feel like I still have to worry about you. You went from screwing any woman within your line of sight to never sleeping with anyone.” She keeps looking around me, desperate to spot my mysterious guest. “You stopped going to clubs. You spent even more time working than usual. You were very, very depressed.”

“While you carried on like you always do.” I rub my jaw. “If I managed to finally find Farah Todd, what would you want to happen to her?”

“I wouldn’t want to be involved.” She fiddles with the button of her shirt, pretending to be fascinated by its stitching. “I’ve been working on forgetting and I plan to keep doing that. Capiche?”

“She hurt you. She deserves some—”

“You’re the one obsessed with that, Kee-kee, not me.” She looks back up at me. “It’s because of Olivia.”

“This has nothing to do with Olivia,” I say tersely. “The replicas are in the library?” Changing the subject from the past.

“On the shelf. Try to not let any cats in.” She takes my hand, squeezing it. “Thank you, Kieran. Try to not think about that woman. Breathe in, breathe out, tell our enemies to go fuck themselves. That’s the mantra.”

She spins around, half-dancing to the entryway and out the door.

It’s what reminds me about why nobody would be able to tell we’re related. We’re not blood-related. My foster sister and I are polar opposites. She is light and air, where I’m darkness and misery.

I turn around.

The smallest movement near the entrance to the lounge catches my eye. It resembles some blonde hair I know—that’s the color of sunrise.

I briskly walk over to the room. As I’m about to round the corner, I hear her trying to scurry, but I move too fast. I grab onto the edge of her sleeve, yanking her back toward me. Her feet slide, and she scrambles to get them back underneath her.

“What were you doing?” I hiss. She could have heard so much. She could have seen so much. If she figures out that my sister is the one she burned, she will know that as soon as I have my children, I’m casting her out to the wolves. “What did you hear?”

“Nothing,” she says, trying to pry my fingers off her sleeve.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

“Bullshit.” I drag her closer to me, crushing her hands between our chests. They’re cold against my skin. “Tell me. What exactly did you hear?”

“Nothing,” she repeats. “It took me a while to sneak around without being seen. I ran into that room while your girlfriend was looking behind her. I thought it was the best position, but that hawk sculpture is in the way and all your sweet nothings were too quiet to hear. Why does it matter?”

I stare at her. Those soft green eyes glare back at me. If she’s lying, she’s lying incredibly well. I look over my shoulder. It’s true that the hawk statue is in the way. She wouldn’t have been able to see Ellie clearly.

Ellie. I didn’t put her first last time, but this time, she is the only thing that matters.

“Let’s go,” I say, changing my grasp to grip onto her wrist. “Dinner is over.”

“What if I’m still eating?”

“I don’t care.”

I half-drag her back to her room. When I stop in front of it, she bumps into me. Looking down at her, she seems smaller. She seems vulnerable.

With slightly less force, I nudge her into the room.

“Have a good night,” I say, starting to close the door.

“Bite me.”

I close the door and lock it. I shake my head. She may have intended it as an insult, but it sounded a lot like an invitation.

I watch the sunrise, but it's not some peaceful endeavor. I hate it. I haven't slept, I haven't fucked, I've just watched the goddamn sun do the same thing it does every second of every day.

The glows of oranges and yellow remind me of the fire Farah started.

They also remind me of how she burned for me the night I took her virginity, incandescent and with a gravitational force that's impossible to pull away from.

I roll over and check my phone.

Usually, I start running two hours before the sun comes up unless I've been making calls to Japan or Korea. If that's the case, I start running an hour before sunrise. After the run, I get on the phone and determine if I need to change my tactics to keep the herd moving in the right direction. Everything is about ambition and control.

I've become lazy since Farah came into my life. I've lost my ambition. I've lost my control. I'm an everyday man with nothing to bring into the world but deficiency and dependency.

I cut my teeth on turning the world upside down to throw my enemies off of it. Ellie deserves a brother who will do the same to her enemies. Not someone who becomes unraveled by that enemy simply because she has skin that makes silk feel rough and a flush to her cheeks when she's aroused.

I get dressed slowly, trying to not imagine it's her hands trailing up my arms instead



of Egyptian cotton or that I'll never finish buttoning my pants up before her hand is slipping in and turning a late morning into a late afternoon.

It's been two months since I fucked someone. That's the problem. I let it go on for too long, and now my libido is turning monstrous.

She's just a woman, a gender I've been around my whole life. There is no enigma here; it is just a failure to prepare for the way that animosity can cross the membrane into desire. It's biochemistry. It's a tomb for my common sense.

As I approach her room, it takes me longer to notice than it should have. I see the first wood chip near the leg of a console table. It occurs to me that it's odd because my cleaning staff is impeccable, and it's a long way for the wood to travel from the den—the only place we've had any stove fires. But my brain discards the oddity in my determination to get to Farah.

It's not until I see two more wood chips in the hallway that it registers as an ominous sign.

I pick up my pace, but it only takes a few more feet before I see the scattering of wood chips in front of Farah's room and the hole in the door, nearly four feet in diameter. The lamp with the stone base and one of the bed frame's side rails lies in the center of the explosion of wood.

It's a taunt. She wants me to know exactly how she broke through the door and how I could have stopped her—because I saw her dismantling her bed.

I should be pissed, but the willpower and persistence she exhibited are the kind of qualities I'd kill for in my corporation.

For all the extra space in my thoughts where the anger should expand, it's taken over

by concern. The weather reports broadcast plunging temperatures, and there's a significantly higher chance she runs into danger in the city than she would have in the small town she'd been hiding in.

I'll get ahold of Craig. As the Superintendent of Police, he'll be reluctant to jump into a search for an adult woman who could have disappeared a half hour ago, but with the way he grovels during charity events, he'll yank out his own teeth to make me happy.

I quickly move down the steps, pulling out my phone. I listen to it ring as I walk into the kitchen.

I stop.

Sitting at the kitchen island, legs crossed and eating applesauce, is Farah.

I cancel the call as I hear Craig's voice answer. I slide my phone back into my pocket. Farah looks back at me, unfazed, with the hint of a mischievous flicker in her eyes.

"What on God's earth did you do to my door?" I ask.

"Opened up the space a bit," she says, licking the spoon. I look over at the refrigerator, ignoring my cock stirring. "You don't like it?"

"If the interior design theme is a crack house, it's perfect. Was that your intention?"

"It seems fitting to me." She sets down her spoon. "Wouldn't a crack house keep pregnant women captive?"

"You make this hypothetical woman sound innocent." I take a few steps closer to her, not breaking eye contact. She doesn't react. The men I've faced off in litigation were more unnerved than she is. "Did you expect better accommodations? Would you like me to supply you with gasoline and a lighter?"

"I'd like you to supply me with a basic level of respect," she says. "I know I'm... I've done immoral things. I'm not a great person."

The way her lip twitches tells me that she's being honest. It should vindicate me, but

it scrapes inside my chest.

She swallows and raises her chin up. “But I’m not going to lie down and let you mistreat me. Maybe a few months ago, I would’ve, but now that I’m going to be a mother, I know I wouldn’t want anyone to treat my children that way.”

It sounds rehearsed. It also sounds sincere.

“You want me to treat you with respect? Then explain to me how burning a woman and leaving her to die in a fire is showing respect.” I take her face in my hands. She flinches, but she stares back at me, her lips tightening together. “Do you know what those flames did to her? The way it burned her?”

My thumb etches along the sides of her face, curving into her hairline.

“Her hair burned right here. Have you smelled burning hair before? It barely missed her eye. It kept burning down. She never said how much it hurt, but it must have been unimaginable.”

My thumb continues to trace around her cheek and to the corner of her lips. Her mouth slightly opens, almost inviting me in.

She slowly pulls away. While she’d seemed dazed as I was talking, now pain cuts through her expression.

“I know you see yourself as judge, jury, and executioner,” she says. “But using a woman’s tragedy to hurt me is low. I wasn’t the one who started the fire, and I didn’t know anyone was in the building, so—”

“Explain that one to me,” I say.

“What?”

“You were fired from the business that was set on fire. Motive. You were spotted there by your boss. A witness. You were seen on nearby businesses’ surveillance cameras. Physical evidence. But you weren’t the arsonist? That would be an unprecedented number of coincidences.”

“It’s... there’s more to it than that.”

“Explain it.”

She stares at me. “You wouldn’t understand. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“I don’t believe you now, so that wouldn’t be a change.”

She turns away from me, her elbow hitting against the spoon in her applesauce container. The container topples over, empty.

“The twins can’t survive on you eating only applesauce,” I say. “You need to consider what they need.”

“I’ll eat again when I’m hungry,” she says. “Do you enjoy making women feel sick all of the time?”

“My chef has the day off, but I’ll make an omelet.” I stand up and walk over to the refrigerator. “If you have to choke it down, you’ll choke it down.”

Because I’m afraid she may decide to bolt after all, but it’s also the way she looks from across the kitchen island. Like she doesn’t know she’s the kind of trouble that gets a man hooked before he sees it coming.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I whisk the eggs as the pan sizzles from the butter. I pour the mixture into the pan. After I chop up part of a pepper, I curve the spatula around the edges of the pan. The outside is cooking much faster than the inside.

“Move over,” Farah says, bouncing off her stool and striding over to my side. “You should have heated up the pan before you started cooking. It’s also better to add a bit of milk. I’d also cook the peppers first before starting the omelet, but we can just add it in.”

I hand her the spatula. Under most circumstances, I’d have fought against someone taking over, but being that close to her, I can smell the shampoo and soap I left in her bathroom. I’d tried to get the same jasmine scent she’d had when we met, but this one is slightly less sweet. It doesn’t change the way it brings me back to that night.

“Did you have some secret culinary degree?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

She turns down the heat under the pan. “No, my brother taught me.”

“It must have been your father’s job to teach you to not commit arson.”

She snorts. “No. My father wasn’t a good person. He didn’t teach me anything.”

I don’t recall much about my biological parents—a tantrum from my father as he knocked down the cradle in a desperate attempt to find his stash and a flash of my mother draped in a chair with a glassy look in her eyes—but the edge in her voice reminds me of some of my foster parents.

But I didn't leave anyone to burn in a building.

"Daddy issues," I say. "That fits."

She glares at me as she flips over the omelet. She sprinkles some cheese and the chopped pepper into it.

The truth is I've made hundreds of omelets in my life. Ellie loves them with sautéed mushrooms. But Farah's making me incompetent. She's twisted me around so much that even things that should be instinctive are forgotten.

I should be focusing on her cooking, but watching her is sensual in a way that makes me think I've never seen sensuality. Her movements are graceful, swaying between the stove, the cabinet drawers, and the refrigerator. It's like her feet barely touch the ground. The faintest smile tugs at her lips with a subtle pink in her cheeks. Her brow is furrowed—not in confusion, but in intense concentration. It's not like a woman who would smash down a door just to prove a point.

But, if I'm honest with myself, I also find that side provocative.

"I don't know how you expect to raise the twins together," she says, drying her hands off. She throws that hand towel at me. "If you're always going to treat me like an enemy."

I toss the hand towel on the counter.

"I'd take that more seriously if you hadn't just broken down my door."

"I wouldn't have broken down the door if you hadn't locked me inside the room."

"Do you want to remember why I locked you in a room?"

“Because you’re a self-righteous ass.”

She opens the refrigerator. I shut it, twisting her around to pin her against the stainless steel. It’s not rage at her insult, but the indifferent attitude toward burning Ellie. Looking straight at her, seeing the coldness in her eyes, should make that rage grow, but it’s not coldness I see. Defiance, yes, but a gentleness dominates her features. Even when she’s trying to appear aggressive, it’s like a vicious fawn. My injured, vicious fawn.

Her eyes soften more as she looks at me. It pierces a hook through me—the most transparent bait that I’ve bitten into.

“So, why didn’t you run?” I ask. “Do you plan on continuing to steal from me? Or do you plan to set my house on fire?”

“You’ve made it clear that you have the money and influence to track me down,” she says. “You also made your point by nailing down my windows—every time I escape, my situation gets worse. I’m capable of making a rational decision.”

I narrow my eyes. Her chest is rising and falling, pressing against my chest in a way that’s getting increasingly hard to ignore. But I have to, because she’s a liar.

“You’re also capable of scheming,” I say. “I’d say you’re more capable of that than rational decisions.”

“I would never scheme,” she scoffs. “You must be thinking of a man who would buy an old house, simply to trap a pregnant woman who works as a cleaner.”

Defiance hardens her expression. I think about how that mouth could be softened—by harsh words or something more rigid than that—her expression changes. The green of her eyes gets brighter as her eyes widen. Fear. Then panic.



The hooks tear through my chest as I consider my place in triggering that fear.

Then, I see the flicker of light in the reflection of her eyes.

Flames.

I spin around. The hand towel was too close to the stove. It's going up in flames with concerning efficiency.

I snatch the mini fire extinguisher out from under the sink, pulling the pin and squeezing the trigger. The foam sprays out. I keep sweeping over it until it looks like a dire incident with whipped cream. I'd had an incident like that once with a singer before her world tour. Her name escapes me now.

I turn back to Farah, expecting some level of relief, but her hands are twisted together, pressed tight against her chest, while her eyes are still wide. She's shaking.

I set the extinguisher down slowly. I reach forward, taking her hand in mine. I squeeze it gently before my other hand rests on her shoulder, guiding her out of the kitchen and toward the dining room.

I pull out a chair.

She doesn't sit down.

"Sit down," I tell her. She looks over at me like I just appeared in the room. Her knees bend slowly, and she sits.

I keep watching her. Her hands aren't shaking as hard now, but there's a slight tremor to them. I shouldn't care. I shouldn't be empathetic toward her. If she has an issue with fire, it's her own goddamn fault.

“At least now I know you’re not going to run,” I remark. “Considering you escaped from your room and didn’t leave the house.”

She’s not looking at me anymore, staring straight ahead like she can still see the fire instead of a wall.

If there is one thing I’ve found out about her, it’s that her temper can break through any locked door or barrier—even one made by her own brain.

“So, I’m going to take off the door,” I say. “You’re not getting a new one.”

Her head snaps up. “What? What about my privacy? Don’t I deserve that?”

“You smashed my door to pieces. You deserve many things; one of them isn’t privacy.”

She stands up, steadier than she’s been all morning. “You must be compensating for a lot to need this much control over another person.”

“We both know I don’t need to compensate for anything.”

Shoving my shoulder, she moves past me. She turns, so she doesn’t have to walk through the kitchen, but at least the fear that overtook her has gone back into the shadows.

I only wish I could cast my concern for her into the shadows too. This story only ends one way, and it’s not with Ellie praising me for taking care of the woman who left her to die.

It will end with legal justice, followed by unbearable quiet.

## Chapter seven

~FARAH~

I lay on my stomach at the top of the stairway, concentrating on the voices that drift from the first floor. Kieran told me to stay out of sight when this man showed up, but the longer I've been around him, the more I've realized that instead of having a wolf inside me, there is a cowardly mouse and a reckless honey badger.

The mouse learned to survive around my father. Quiet. Invisible. Always bracing for impact.

The honey badger came straight from my brother's imagination. Defiant. Unafraid. Ready to bite anything that smells like control.

Since Kieran told me to stay out of sight when this man showed up, the mouse is obeying by staying camouflaged, but the honey badger can't help but rebel a little bit, regardless of what consequences might follow.

A rebellion is necessary after everything this morning. I need to feel some level of control. Kieran knows I'm lying about giving in and allowing him to have his way. But I need time. I need to find out how he'd tracked me down the first time, so I can avoid whatever mistake I made.

Unfortunately, it sounds like this man that's visiting is an event planner, so it's a waste of a rebellion.

"We were thinking that dinner is going to be served at five," the other man says. "The caterer says that's the best time to start with older guests and children."

"It's whatever Ellie wants," Kieran says. "But I've also been considering that the

Baldwins' Casino could be a better venue. It has a gorgeous ballroom and staff who trained in the best locations in the world. I know some people. We could secure a night there.”

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

“That would be amazing,” the man says. “But Ellie is in love with the idea of having it here. If we don’t have it here, she’ll be coming for both of our necks.”

“If it’s what she wants,” Kieran says, giving in.

Based on how he is with me, he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who gives in easily. He must really love this Ellie woman.

It shouldn’t matter to me. But my throat constricts, and it feels like I’m plunging into deep water.

Stockholm Syndrome. Or it’s pregnancy hormones messing with my mind.

I slowly get up onto my knees, grasping the railing.

The other man clears his throat. “Ellie also wants to do something in memory of Olivia.”

I freeze.

“If it’s what she wants,” Kieran repeats, but this time his words have a sharp edge to them.

“She wants you to be included in it.”

“This event is for her. It’s nothing to do with me.”

“She thinks you need closure. She wants what’s best for you.”

In memory. Closure. Olivia is a deceased loved one. It doesn’t excuse it, but it makes more sense about why he’s so cold.

“Robert Young is dead,” Kieran says. “That’s all the closure I need.”

The venom in his voice makes my hand slip off the railing. It makes a small thudding noise as my fingers hit the floor. I hold my breath, waiting to see if either of them heard me.

“Understood,” the other man says. “Let’s talk about the flowers. Ellie wants to fill every inch with lilies, but I suspect that will make it difficult to walk. We could line the hallways and—”

His voice fades as they walk to a different room.

I hold my hand close to my chest. This Robert Young man is dead, and Kieran seems sadistically satisfied about it. It’s the kind of satisfaction you get from a job well done—from knowing that someone got exactly what they deserved.

Did he kill him? He does seem like a man who is obsessed with revenge.

Did this Robert Young commit arson and kill Olivia? Is that why he’s so enraged about what he thinks I did?

Will that rage one day explode and I’ll be another person that he’s sneeringly talking about being dead?

I look over the staircase. Both of them are gone.

But the table in the center of the foyer has a cell phone on it.

Kieran took my burner phone. I've had no way to contact Neal. Kieran wouldn't leave his phone lying around, so it must be the other man's.

I know it's the honey badger taking over my thoughts. I just heard that he may have murdered a man, and now I'm doing something that could trigger him into a rage.

But if I don't do it, both the honey badger and the mouse may be killed.

I creep down the stairs, listening carefully after every couple of steps in case the men come back.

I snatch up the phone and retreat to the bottom of the steps, making myself as small as possible. I pause after I type in Neal's number.

Safe, but am here if anything happens. Don't text back, borrowed phone.

I share my location with him and send the text. As soon as I see it went through, I delete the text.



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

Even if this event planner gets a text back from Neal, hopefully, it will sound like somebody texting the wrong number. Hopefully, Neal isn't so high that he loses all common sense.

I set the phone back on the table, placing it like it was angled before. I used to do the same thing when using or taking things my father might disapprove of, which was nearly everything. I learned to be a shadow, and that lesson might keep me alive.

I hustle back to my prison, which is now missing its door. Kieran may be a tyrant and a psychopath, but he does keep his word.

I slip into the attached bathroom, locking the door behind me. Every time I step in here, it feels like I've stepped into a Regency-era bathroom with its marble floor, porcelain tub, chandelier, massive mirror with ornate framing, and freshly cut bouquets displayed around the room. Even the ceiling is carved with intricate designs that remind me of ceilings in cathedrals.

The most modern part about it is that the floor is heated, which I take advantage of as I sit down against the door.

I close my eyes, trying to plot my next steps. I need to let my spineless side take over. I need to be a wallflower that lets Kieran think he's in control.

And if something happens to me, Neal will know what happened. He won't think I abandoned him.

Did Kieran kill Robert Young?

I try to imagine Kieran with his hands around my throat, taking my life, but it only reminds me of the night we were together. There were moments when I was well aware of his strength, and I knew it took restraint for him to not use me like a doll, but he used that strength to be gentle with me. It was about domination, but not control. Every time I try to picture him killing me, I can feel him inside me, with his hands trailing down from my throat to my breasts, my waist, and my ass. My breath shortens, but not from fear.

Still, I heard the malice in his voice when he said Robert Young was dead. And I also didn't think those hands would be keeping me captive here. I didn't think he'd lock me in a room or deprive me of my privacy.

I fooled myself into thinking I knew a man I slept with once. It must be true what they say about women losing their virginity. We lose our minds. It makes us develop emotions and attachments that should never be brought to the light, because if we look too closely at them, we'll see they started decaying as soon as they were felt.

But I'm like that with all men in my life. Every time I try to push myself in a new direction, the compass leads me back north.

It just turns out that north is the direction to Hell.

I bundle the blankets tighter around me. I thought freezing-my-ass-off was a phrase people used to exaggerate, but I'm starting to think it may be possible. Or, at the very least, my toes may snap off like icicles on a roof.

A thermostat is near the door, but I've touched all the buttons without the temperature going up. Knowing how bad my luck is, I likely plunged the room to sub-zero temperatures.

I should've left it alone.

I should've left a lot of things alone.

The door being taken off probably doesn't help my situation. This mansion is so large that I can't imagine how long it would take to heat up a single room, much less most of the structure.

I need to find more blankets.

I swing the sheets off, the cold air nipping at me.

It's nearly 2 a.m., so I move down the hallway quietly. I'd rather he stay fast asleep than find me, the weakling that can't deal with the cold. From what I've seen, it's completely possible that he's a reptile, basking during the day and going into stasis at night.

I peek inside a bedroom. I tiptoe in, finding a dresser. I open the drawers. They're all empty. A chest sits under the window. It's also empty.

In another room, I find a closet. Nothing inside it.

My family wasn't poor. We were upper-middle class, which only made it easier for my father's violence to be hidden by new school clothes and distract people with how grateful Neal and I should be. Still, having all these empty rooms seems absurdly excessive, and I can't imagine a less deserving person owning it.

I continue my search with no success. I'm going to end up needing to use the towels from the bathroom and layer them over me. But if he finds me like that, I'll never live it down. I'll be the woman who was too dumb to figure out the thermostat or find another blanket.

Near the end of the hallway, a bright light shines out of one of the rooms.

He works during the day. What would he be doing up this late?

Vampirism. The only possible answer.

I sneak closer, peering inside.

It's unmistakably Kieran, though his back is turned toward me as he scales a rock climbing wall. The grips on the wall rise all the way up to the ceiling, which seems much higher here than in the other rooms.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I'd puzzle over whether this room cuts into the third floor, but as Kieran tugs on the climbing rope, the muscles in his back flex. My breath catches in my throat. I remember my fingertips pressing against that back, feeling the muscles move underneath my touch. I've imagined having sex with him in the last two months and how his back muscles would slide under my palms, but my imagination didn't do it justice. I may as well have been a virgin again, only imagining what sex feels like. Here, it's real—terrifyingly and admirably so.

I flinch as he abruptly jumps down from the wall, the rope sending out a high-pitched squeal at the abrupt shift. I quickly back up before pivoting and hurrying down the hall.

By the time I jump back into my bed, I'm sweating. More heat radiates off of me than I thought possible.

The stress of this situation is making my mind concoct insane scenarios. I'm not one of those women who dream of the bad boy or desire a man simply because he showed no interest in her. I'd always wanted a sensible man—one that wouldn't be cruel and not suffocate me too much with his needs and wants. I never fantasized about anything other than subdued comfort. Safety.

But I can't help but wonder if it'd be just as good the second time with Kieran. Would I risk comfort and safety for that? Would it be equally sacred and reckless the second time?

In the last couple of months, while I'd craved his touch, I'd considered sleeping with other men. I'd wanted to reenact our night together. But every time a man had shown

interest in me, all I could think was that it wasn't Kieran. It could never be as good. Another man couldn't be as compassionate or as empathetic as Kieran had been.

It turns out that this current Kieran can't be either. And still, I find myself wanting him.

It's a fool's dream. Some part of me must believe I'll find that man in him again, buried underneath hard muscles and a careless attitude.

Heavy footsteps approach the door. I close my eyes and relax my body, hoping I resemble some level of a woman who is asleep.

The footsteps enter the room.

My heart is beating so fast it almost hurts. I'd like to say it was fear, but it feels a lot more like anticipation.

Something large and heavy drapes over me. It takes me a moment to realize it's a blanket. After another second, I hear a faint beeping noise. I slowly open my eyes.

The thermostat screen is lit up as Kieran taps on it. Oh. It's a touchscreen.

The heating system rumbles to life.

I close my eyes again as he starts to turn around. I try to not hold my breath, but I still end up gasping after several seconds.

I open my eyes. He's gone.

I let out a slow breath, sinking deeper under the sheets. The blanket he'd pulled over me has the faint scent of pine, and the weight of it makes a cocoon of warmth. I

shouldn't have this ache in my chest that's enamored by this small act of kindness.

I try to not think of anything. I don't think about the small act of kindness. I don't think about how warm his body would be underneath these blankets with me. I don't imagine him telling me that he noticed me spying on him with his hot breath curling around my ear. I don't imagine his legs brushing up against mine. I don't imagine how I'd shiver and he'd mistake it for me being cold, so he'd pull me close. He'd be as gentle with me as he was when we first met.

I don't imagine his kiss, the faint taste of sweat on his lips. I don't imagine us twisting together or him pulling me underneath his weight.

I don't imagine my hands on his back, feeling those muscles flex like wings. I don't imagine his mouth on my throat and on my breasts. I don't imagine his hand moving where my hand is moving now, rubbing until my thighs collapse open for him.

I don't imagine him thrusting into me, abandoning all gentleness because we're both so desperate, it'd be foolish to pretend. I don't imagine the bed turning into a sauna of heat and sweat as he drives into me with reckless thrusts and me clinging to him, somewhere between being afraid of getting thrown off a bull and encouraging that danger closer and closer.

I remove my hand from between my thighs and roll over onto my side. It doesn't help. If dissatisfaction came like a chill, not even Death Valley could make me warm. It's these ridiculous pregnancy hormones. Once I have these twins, I'll be disgusted with myself for even thinking about Kieran.

Not that I'm thinking about him. I swear.

Chapter eight

~KIERAN~

I rock climb to calm the thoughts that are constantly firing in my brain. Doing it inside isn't as relaxing as climbing outside, but with my schedule, it's easier to fit in.

But no matter how many times I climb, no matter how often I clear my mind, I'm fucking haunted.

Farah moves through my thoughts like a ghost through the walls. She's set up residence in my brain, turning all the electricity toward her. No matter how hard I try to shake her, and no matter how hard I tighten my fist around the thoughts without her, she slips through and eclipses everything else.

I have never encountered a problem I couldn't bend and twist into a solution or, even more commonly, a weapon.

But this one is fortified by two months of seething rage.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I walk out of Farah's room after turning up the temperature on her thermostat. I should have just let her freeze, but the idea of letting her be cold itched at my brain the whole time I was climbing.

When I saw her curled up on her bed, I would've done anything to make her warmer—give her the door to my bedroom, burn down the rest of the house so she could benefit from the warmth, jump under the sheets with her and make enough friction that we turn into scorched kindling.

The only reason I could walk away is because I didn't want to wake her up, and the blanket I'd given her was made for winter camping.

My phone chirps loudly. I check it. The notification for the surveillance around my house shows a snapshot of the rear courtyard. I tap on the notification.

The snapshot expands. In the corner, a man is looking up at the mansion. Mid or late 20s and in black clothes. There is no way for anybody to accidentally stumble past my gate.

I have enemies. Not in a boastful way, but in a way that being the CEO of a powerful corporation naturally produces. Every disgruntled ex-employee, every envious competing CEO, and every son or daughter of the owner of a company that I bought wants to separate my jaw from my skull.

So, trying to break into my house to commit violence isn't surprising.

I grab my gun, secured under a hidden compartment in my desk. I tuck it in my

waistband before going back to Farah's bedroom.

I shake her shoulders, harder than I intend to.

"What?" she mumbles.

"Somebody is breaking in. We have to get you in the bathroom."

When she barely reacts, I pull the blankets off her. She's wearing a white undershirt I lent her. It fits her loosely except around her breasts, where the material stretches. If I thought I was haunted by her before, seeing her in my undershirt makes me possessed.

As she sits up, rubbing her eyes—dramatically enough to be suspicious—I reach around her, gripping her waist. I pull her toward the edge of the bed. She nudges back against me, exhaustedly annoyed.

I should just leave her. She should be able to get in the bathroom and lock the door before whoever is outside the house gets in. My priority should be protecting the house, which, by extension, will protect her.

I don't move.

She gets to her feet. Her eyes widen as she looks at me, understanding turning her eyes bright. "An intruder?"

"I suspect so," I say, putting my hand on the small of her back and pushing her forward. She lets me guide her until she's stepped into the bathroom. I grip onto the doorknob. "Lock this as soon as I close it. Don't turn on the light. Keep quiet."

"You're a tyrant," she mutters.

“If that’s—” I start to say, but I turn away and head to the entrance without finishing my thought.

If having the last word is what keeps you safe, so be it.

I grip the gun tighter, holding it close to my side as I turn around the northeastern corner of my house, scanning for movement. Something has taken over me that hasn’t happened before. I’ve been protective over Ellie and Olivia, but this feels sharply different.

It must be the twins. I never believed much in a biological drive, but my instincts have shifted too drastically to consider it’s caused by anything else. Self-preservation is gone outside of wanting to survive to protect my family. I’ve become gritted teeth, ready to snap around any throat that could be a threat. If I break my jaw during it, it will be worth it if the threat is gone.

I see the shadow of the man as he lingers near the window. He must have realized the front door is locked, and he doesn’t know about the ones that are disguised as windows in the back.

He’ll regret not doing his research.

I raise the gun and circle around him. At the last second, he spins around. He’s face to face with my 9mm.

He doesn’t look like a pro, if it wasn’t evident enough by how clumsy and slow he is, so he wasn’t sent by an enemy company.

He also doesn’t look like one of my ex-employees. Not to stereotype him, but this man has never earned more than 20k a year.

That can only mean he's the child of a parent who sold their company to me, and he considers it a huge injustice in his life.

Pathetic.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” I ask.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

“No,” the man says. His head is too large for his body, but it’s less about being disproportionate and more that he’s unnaturally thin. Sick or drugs. His blonde hair is shaved close to his head, but it’s uneven.

He’s also a terrible liar.

“Throw it over to me.”

“I said I didn’t have any weapons.”

“I heard you. Forgive me if I don’t believe the man trespassing on my land.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe a kidnapper.”

He charges at me. He’s not slow, but the distance between us gives me enough time to sidestep him. I slam the gun between his shoulders. He crumples.

It’s disappointing. I expected more of a fight. I need more of a fight.

He grabs at my ankle. I slip out of his grip, stomping down on his wrist. He grunts, his fingers contracting and loosening.

“Stop!”

Small hands shove me. With her swaying blonde hair, Farah looks like a burst of light in the darkness. It’s disarmingly cute, even as she continues shoving and hitting me. I didn’t know somebody could throw so many punches at somebody’s face and miss

every time.

I deke another punch, grabbing her around the waist and lurching her backward.

“Get back in the house!” I point up toward her room, immediately regretting it, thinking about how this man could find her from that small gesture. She takes deep, heaving breaths, several strands of her hair falling in her face. “Fuck, I’m trying to protect you!”

“And I’m trying to protect him!”

She points past me, to the man.

I glance back. The man is slowly standing up.

“He’s my brother,” she continues.

“Neal,” I say slowly. I recall the surveillance photos of Neal Todd. He’s had long, badly formed dreadlocks and a beard.

At least I was right about the addiction.

“Neal,” she echoes. She runs over to his side, her shoulder hitting against my arm as she passes by. She embraces him so tightly that he winces.

“How does your brother know where you are?” I ask.

“I texted him in case anything happened to me.”

“Texted how?” I ask. “You don’t have a phone.”

She glares at me, still holding tight to her brother.

“I didn’t know he was going to show up,” she says, dodging my question better than I could dodge her punches. It doesn’t take much imagination to figure out whose phone she stole. She turns back to Neal. “We need to ice your arm.”

“He’s not coming inside the house.”

“You hurt my brother,” she snaps. “You lost the right to set rules about this.”

“It’s my property. If I say—”

“If he’s not going in, I’m not going in.”

She folds her arms over her chest. Her cheeks are pink from the cold. With only the undershirt on, I can see the goosebumps on her skin and hard nipples pressed against the thin fabric. A shiver passes through her, despite her attempts to hide it. It has to be below 40s. She’s already been out here too long.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

She stares at me. I stare back.

After several seconds, I bow my head, gesturing inside.

“Come in, Mr. Todd,” I say. “Welcome to my home.”

Farah’s eyes burn holes into me as we sit in the den and she wraps her brother’s wrist.

“You don’t need to be here,” she says. “I promise to only let Neal steal one or two of your books.”

“I can’t imagine a world where Neal would need a book,” I say. “Besides, I know you’re the thief in the family.”

She looks like she’s ready to respond, but when nothing comes out, I’m left with her only baring her teeth.

“Just ignore him, Rah,” Neal says, nudging his knee against her knee. She forces a smile, returning her focus to his arm.

It reminds me of when I bandaged her burned hand.

It’s a twist of emotions, hitting all at once and tightening in my chest.

With the gentleness of her touch and the way her face seems to glow like the ember in a dying fire—I can’t imagine any man not wanting a piece of her. Men must surround her, hoping she’ll give them something to hold on to.



So, why do I insist on believing the twins are mine?

It could have been a taxi driver as she left the city. It could be a man she sat next to on the bus. It could be a stranger she bumped into at a diner. It could have been a fling, a short romance, or something more permanent that I took her away from.

It doesn't matter.

If there were another man, he would have tracked her down by now. He would have broken into every home from here to L.A. to find her. He would have been the one she texted instead of her spineless brother.

My shoulders tense. If another man comes, I'll make him sorry he did. Nobody can take care of her like I can.

The twins, I mean.

Farah doesn't seem to know what to do with the last of the bandage wrap, and I'm not exactly in the mood to help Neal.

My phone vibrates. I glance down at the notification.

"Neal's taxi is here," I say, standing up. "I assume his wrist is healthy enough to sit in the back of a car?"

Farah glares at me. "It'd be better if I could keep an eye on it."

"He can send you a photo."

"I don't have a phone."

“Steal another one.” I indicate toward the foyer. “We don’t want to keep the driver waiting.”

Neal stands up. “It’s fine, Farah. I should be getting back to my apartment anyway.”

He eyes me as he steps around my frame. Farah’s glare is far more lethal.

“What the hell is your problem?” she hisses as she passes me, but she doesn’t wait for my answer as she walks with her brother to the foyer.

I could give her an answer, but it wouldn’t matter to her. Neal is someone who Farah would sacrifice everything for, and he would gladly accept that sacrifice. He’s a vampire, pretending to be a victim of his own bloodlust.

I watch the two of them at the door. Neal puts his hands on her shoulders—insisting that she stay inside while he walks to the taxi. A polite vampire, but civility is a low bar.

She opens the door for him. They hug. He steps out. She watches him for a few seconds before closing the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

When she looks back at me, she looks like she's imagining tearing the skin off of my face.

"What is your issue?" she demands, stalking up to me. "Do you get off on being heartless? Do you think it makes you look powerful? It makes you look like someone with deep, ugly insecurities. You think that being cold-hearted makes people respect you, but it's just pitiful."

"Before you keep listing all of my best qualities, you may want to remember you're under my roof," I say. "You're eating my food and wearing my clothes. I didn't consider it shocking that I can decide who can and can't be on my property."

"You're the one forcing me to be under your roof and eating your food!" she snaps. "As for the clothes? Fuck it, I don't need them either."

She yanks off the undershirt, throwing it at my face. The warmth of the material is distracting, but not as much as her nearly naked frame storming away from me.

I should respect her enough to leave her alone. I may not be a gentleman, but I'm not a soulless monster either, despite all of her beliefs to the contrary.

But her forceful steps and her threadbare underwear make her ass sway in a way that makes me much worse than a monster.

It makes me a hot-blooded man.

I catch up to her in four long strides, grabbing her arm and twisting her around. My

hands on her waist. I kiss her hard. My mouth collides against hers, rough and possessive.

Her hands are raised away from me, hesitating in the air like she's about to be arrested. I crush my mouth against hers, and my fingers press deep into her hips, keeping her close enough that the idea of space between us is excruciating.

When she kisses me back, her hands grabbing onto my hair, I know we're so far off the cliff that only divine intervention could save us.

But there is no holiness here.

## Chapter nine

~FARAH~

My back hits against the banister, but the pain barely registers. Every aspect of this mansion no longer exists. The only four walls are the heat between Kieran and me. The only ceiling is our exhales, building up like an oncoming storm.

My eyes flutter open as his tongue invades my mouth—fierce and demanding. His hands slide down to my ass, gripping it so tight it lifts me to my toes.

I'm higher than heaven, high enough that I know when I fall, I'll break—but that's a worthy price right now.

His hands slide down to my legs, his fingertips pressing against my inner thighs. When I widen my stance, needing to press myself closer to him, he abruptly jerks my legs up. I almost lose my balance as he lifts me to his waist, my head nearly hitting the wall before his hand on my back steadies me.

Adrenaline rushing through me, it takes me a moment to focus on his face. And it's a clash of emotions. His eyes are soft enough to be mistaken for kind, but his jaw is set with his upper lip barely curled up in the smallest snarl.

He lowers us, his knees settling on one of the lower steps. He lays me down, the edge of the stairs digging into my neck, shoulders, and back. I'm ready to sit up, annoyed at the discomfort, but his mouth quickly moves between my thighs, his hot breath sinking past the thin material of my underwear. The slickness of my arousal soaks the thin fabric. My body tenses, but the only part of me that moves is my legs widening.

He kisses the inside of my thigh, inhaling deeply, taking in my scent, sending a shiver through me. A slight flicker of his tongue sends a surge of desire through me.

The recklessness spirals inside me, and, for once, I give into it without feeling like I'm pretending to be somebody else.

The rage between us burns, adding to the desire. I'll never let him have any part of me except this. He'll never know anything about me except my body. And he knows it well.

The sound of my panties being ripped off is muffled by the sound of our ragged breath. Tossing my underwear aside, he catches my ankle in his hand.

He pins it down on the edge of the step. While it's hard enough to hurt—it reminds me that we hate each other—his tongue darts inside of me, quick movements like thoughts hitting all at once. Two fingers push past my slit, an instant pressure as he stretches me. A feral growl escapes his lips, a warning of how raw this is about to get.

My hips buck off of the stair trying to get closer to his face. Quick, sharp tongue flicks to my sensitive bud has me pulling at his hair, my fingers tangled in a fierce grip. I have never experienced anything like this. All I can see is the top of his head

as he licks and strokes my core. He buries himself deeper, his mouth moving with relentless, possessive control. I'm so close to the edge I can see stars. Fingers pushing in and out of me, his tongue thrashing but sensitive with each stroke up my center. Legs quivering, I'm thankful that I'm sitting as the most earth-shattering orgasm rocks me, my screams echoing in the empty foyer of the mansion.

He looks up at me, desire burning so hot in his eyes, it feels like a mutual torture. I need to recover, but I know there's no time.

"You shouldn't have done that," he says, but before his words can linger, he rises over me. His pants are pulled down, and his size is overwhelming in every sense. Lifting me in a swift movement, I'm pushed against the wall, a moment of shock before he's thrust himself fully inside me.

My fingernails dig into his arm. I pull myself up, meeting his thrusts, even as I can feel a line of bruises forming against the small of my back—a lingering punishment from the stairs. As he rams into me, possessed as I am, I understand what he means. There are some lines you can't cross, and we're moving so far past it, the only thing left is to regret it. But not now. Not when I'm so close to breaking through a numbness I hadn't known I was feeling.

He grips both of my thighs, pinning me against the wall like I weigh nothing. Every thrust is hard and deep, but maddeningly controlled—each one driving more breath from my lungs. I can feel the fury and need behind every stroke, like he's punishing everything that ever existed between us.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

A flicker of fear runs through me, thinking of how alarming it is to not be in control, but he doesn't leave any room to question it. With that level of command over my body, the fear is swallowed up by the intensifying satisfaction.

My legs are tense against his waist as another orgasm hits, a result of the direct pressure of him grinding hard against me. The explosion inside me feels like the world imploding, with all of the natural and feral beauty flashing through me.

He collapses into me, barely keeping himself from crushing me with his weight. His heavy breath hits against my shoulder while his shirt sticks to my sweat-drenched skin. He must have come, but I was too overcome to notice.

As I come back into my body, some of the aches become noticeable—my back, my wrists, my thighs. But it's a good ache. It's a souvenir.

Kieran slowly pulls himself off of me, zipping and buckling his pants. He doesn't look at me.

"That shouldn't have happened," Kieran says.

I look down at myself, naked on my kidnapper's mansion stairs. I feel infinitely more naked now. The only thing stopping me from grabbing my underwear and rushing to pull them on is that I know how childish and emotional it would look—and the fact that they are in shreds at my feet.

"I agree," I say. "It was a mistake."

He nods once before pivoting off the bottom step and walking away. I focus on the physical aches now to distract me from the way my heart is clanging in my chest—a bell that won't be answered.

It was foolish to let my hormones get the best of me. I should have learned the first time.

The overwhelming sensations made me feel like we were burning the whole world down, but the problem with annihilation is that it ends with me standing in the ashes, alone.

I pull on one of the long-sleeved shirts Kieran gave me. It drapes on me like a white dress, the lowest button hitting between my thighs, the silky material contrasting with the soreness in my legs. It's been four days since we slept together, but while Kieran seemsto have vanished into the ether, I can't go downstairs without the feeling of heavy breath against my ear or a tight grip on my wrists.

I can't eat without thinking about our dinner together, his hand around my arm as his thumb caressed my wrist.

I can't sleep without remembering him placing the blanket over me—a gesture I overanalyzed into meaning I meant more than a body to get off with.

I can't even wear his clothes without feeling his body heat, but I don't have a choice when I'll need to walk in the cold for a while before I find a taxi.

He never gave me a coat, and I can't find one around the house. As I stop in front of the entrance doors, I wait for someone to jump out of the shadows and stop me. As I open them, I wait for a shrieking alarm to alert Kieran that I'm leaving. As I step out, I look around for surveillance cameras.



Nothing.

It should feel like freedom, but it feels more like I'm walking out of my house while forgetting my wallet or my phone.

I mean, I don't have either of those, but it's the sense that I'm forgetting something that I need.

It's a colder walk than I expect to get to the gates. Even after I press the button to open the gates and start taking the sidewalk, it seems like all signs of life are banned around it. No squirrels, no people, no cars.

For the last few days, the cook would be prepared with meals like clockwork at 9 a.m., 12 p.m., and 5:30 p.m., but whenever I tried to talk to him, he answered in one-word replies. I'd seen a glimpse of a housekeeper yesterday, but she could have been a lonely illusion because when I tried to find her a few seconds later, she was gone.

The only sign of life that didn't feel hostile or imaginary was a deer that visited the stream in the backyard. I always recognized it as the same one because it was missing the tip of its left ear. I'd avoided giving it a name so I wouldn't get attached, but seeing how lifeless this street is, I can't stomp out the hope of seeing it.

I shiver, bundling Kieran's shirt tighter around me. I should've layered another shirt underneath it. Another mistake to add to my never-ending list.

I hear a car before I see it. I duck my head low, letting my hair drape over my face. Kieran would notice it's me right away, but if one of his house staff is looking for me, they may doubt themselves enough to pass by.

The car drives by. I catch a glimpse of a woman on her phone, her hands cheerfully flourishing. Not somebody looking for me.

As I cross a sidewalk, the city comes back to life with cars aggressively cutting each other off and people loudly talking on their phones.

In front of a corner store, I see the marigold yellow of a taxi. I run forward. I still had sixteen dollars from my work as a house cleaner. It's just enough to get to Neal's apartment.

When the taxi drops me off, it feels strange to see the apartment after more than two months. Maybe Kieran's mansion had turned me into a snob, but the building looks like it's slowly collapsing on itself. The metal door is covered with years of graffiti, while all the windows are covered in a greenish-gray film.

I have to wiggle the door handle at a few different angles before it opens. I plod up the stairs, abruptly feeling tired. I walk down the hallway until I reach room 204. I knock.

I listen to the scrambling of someone rushing to get up. The door jerks open.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

Neal looks above my head for a second before looking down, his eyebrows raised. Neal's always been an open book, and it's undeniable that he's disappointed.

"Oh," he says. "Hey."

"Hi," I say. I indicate into his apartment. "Can I come in?"

"Of course, of course, sorry. I just thought you were going to be Samson."

Samson is his drug dealer. I assume it's not his real name and some reference to the Bible, but I can't be certain if it's ironic or not.

I sit down on his couch, which is covered in a layer of clothes and wrappers from fast food and snacks. He's in the throes of some spiral. Part of me feels guilty that his concern for me could've caused him to slip deeper into his addiction.

Part of me doubts he feels concern at all.

"Are you... doing okay?" I ask. The emotional numbness starts to return to me. I can't be upset that he isn't asking me that question. I'm the reason he's like this. It's not like Kieran has been starving me or beating me.

"I'm great. Just waiting on Samson." He looks over his shoulder like he thought he heard Samson knock.

I lean back on the couch. Something stabs me in the back, but I don't know if I'm more worried about finding a gun or a meth pipe.

“Did you ever look into that rehab center?” I ask.

“What rehab?”

“The one I sent you the link about,” I say. “Right after I left.”

“Oh, right.” He nods several times. “Yeah, yeah. I remember. Of course. I looked at it. It seems expensive.”

“They have payment plans.”

“Seems expensive,” he mutters again. I run my fingers through my hair. Something sticky is making it cling together.

After watching him repeatedly look back at the door, I take a deep breath.

“We need to talk about the fire,” I say.

“What fire?” he asks. “Oh. Bettiol.”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Bettiol.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“We need to. A woman was badly hurt from it. It’s the reason I shouldn’t be in Chicago. It’s why this man can blackmail—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Neal snaps, looking straight at me for the first time.

“You’re talking about rehab like you care about me, but if you keep bringing that up, if you keep pressuring me—it makes me want to do drugs more. If you care, you won’t talk about it.”

I rub my temple. “Neal.”

“You were with that rich guy.” Neal perks up. “With the big house. He must have lots of money.”

“He’s not going to give me any money.”

“He could. You could convince him,” he presses me. “Or you could just steal something. He had lots of expensive things.”

He looks back at the door, holding his breath. No Samson.

I keep hoping he’ll be the brother that he used to be, but the drugs have turned him into a shadow of that man. And worse, I’m the reason for that deterioration.

He could’ve been a leader, a man who changed so many lives, but because of me, he’s living here and his only joy is his next hit.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I should be forced to witness it, but I don't think I can stand it. Every instinct is telling me to return to Kieran's mansion, which becomes more absurd the more that I think about it. Still, the feeling is stronger than the need to stay.

"Do you have any cash?" I ask. "I need it for the taxi back."

He shakes his head, though I can see his wallet near the TV. He's likely saving it to pay Samson, but I shove the anger down. I stand up. I hug him. He half-heartedly pats my shoulder.

I leave his apartment, exhaustion pulling down my bones. It takes me even longer to open the metal door trying to get out than it took me to open it.

As I prepare to cross the parking lot, I see Samson.

His blonde hair whips behind him in the wind, but it's less noticeable than the crude smile cutting across his face.

"Neal's sis," he calls out, stopping in front of me. I try to step around him, but he blocks me. "Your bro owes me nearly five hundred worth of product. How much cash you got on you?"

"Nothing," I say. "Maybe Neal has something."

"That man thinks he can give me a twenty and we're square," he says. "I'm hopin' you're the smarter half."

“I don’t have anything,” I say.

He looks me up and down, his eyes lingering at the ends of Kieran’s shirt. I cross my hands in front of me like they could protect me.

“I know some clubs that might take you,” Samson says, licking his lips. “They might not be legal and I might take a percent. Might take a few privileges too. But I wouldn’t need to take my frustrations out on your bro. You’d have to prove yourself to me, though. Why don’t you get on your knees and beg me for a little… extension?”

“I’m sure it is little,” I say before I can stop myself. He seizes my hair, yanking my head back.

“Watch that mouth, girl,” he snarls, his spit hitting my face. “This is why you need someone to keep you from—”

“Let her go.”

The voice is so cold; it sends a shiver through me. For a second, I think it’s Neal, snapped back to his old self. But as Samson releases me, turning around, I see it’s Kieran.

How the hell did he find me?

“And what are you gonna do if I don’t?” Samson sneers.

“I know Delgado.”

Samson’s skin turns stark white. “Bullshit.”

“Ask him.” Kieran shrugs, but underneath his calm, rage turns his features sharper

and darker. “He’ll be interested to know you’re on his territory and touching a woman associated with a man he respects. I’m sure you know how his men deal with people they don’t like.”

Samson’s nostrils are flaring, but he takes a few steps back. He glances between us.

“I apologize, Miss Todd. I didn’t realize you were spoken for,” he says, his formality taking me by surprise. He turns around, trying to not look like he’s running, but he’s moving much faster than he was when he was walking toward me.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Do I want to know who Delgado is?”

“Old childhood friend.” Kieran crosses the distance between us. His fingertips barely touch my arm before he drops his hand back to his side. He looks up at the building. “Can I assume that’s your brother’s drug dealer? He doesn’t wait for an answer. “I need a word with him before we go home.”

“Don’t,” I say, grabbing his wrist as he starts to move past me. He glances down at my hand.

“He’s getting you involved in things that are dangerous,” he says. “Which means he’s also endangering my children. He needs to be taught a lesson.”

“I’m here because of my own choices,” I say.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” I insist. “Look, I know you see Neal as some worthless addict, but Neal saved me all of the time when I was a kid. It’s the least I can do to help him out now.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

His eyes search my face. I try to keep my expression blank, but it still feels like he's picking out parts of my mind that I didn't even know were there.

"This is about your father?" he says. "You said your father wasn't nice."

I release his wrist. "It doesn't matter the reason. What matters is that he deserves some grace."

He keeps looking at me. I want to close my eyes and give him less of a chance to find some part of me he hates, but I keep my eyes on him.

"Fine," he says. "As long as you come back to the house and stay away from this side of the city."

I look back at Neal's apartment. I imagine him slowly losing his mind, wondering why Samson hasn't shown up yet. It's a dagger through the heart, but with his refusal to get help and how I remind him of things he'd rather forget, my presence seems more like a burden than a loving hand.

I nod once. He puts his hand on my shoulder and guides me over to his car.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"It wasn't hard to figure out where you'd gone," he says. "If it isn't obvious at this point, I'd go to the ends of the earth to find you."

With the slight harshness in his voice, I know he means it as a threat, but as it sinks

in, I realize it's all I've wanted. Someone who will always find me. Someone who always wants to find me.

His hand lingers on mine as he helps me into the passenger seat of his car. I try to not let it matter to me, but it does. As he gets into the driver's seat, he drives with one hand on the wheel and the other hand on the center console, an inch away from mine.

He doesn't need to go to the ends of the earth to find me because it's a gravitational force between us. But I've learned that revolving around someone doesn't make it a good thing.

It's just another way to say you have no control.

Chapter ten

~KIERAN~

I pull on my running shoes, tightening the laces. They were created by a NASA engineer to be water-resistant, but water has a way of dripping in, then flooding into the places it's wanted least.

Women can be that way as well. At least one of them can.

The shoes are necessary. Many of the streets I run on aren't maintained, and it snowed about ten inches last night. When I couldn't sleep, I'd watched it come down and rationalized wanting to keep Farah safe. She is carrying my children; she's the only thing keeping them alive. But it was much more difficult to rationalize the way my brain burns like a harsh chemical is corroding it—except when I'm near her.

The run, combined with the cold temperatures, will flush out whatever toxin infiltrated my body. I'll expel it—and her—and return to a version of myself that can

breathe just fine alone.

As I pass by the library, I catch a glimpse out the bay window. The snow is still piling up, making my backyard look like untouched land in Antarctica.

Farah doesn't know that I've seen her huddle near the cherry blossom, waiting for the deer to make its trek to the creek that runs through the yard. Even if she manages to find a coat instead of the blankets she drags out, walking through it will be a test of endurance, and she won't be able to hide as easily when the snow will make her several inches taller.

Oh well. She can stay inside. It's better for the twins.

I pull on my coat and leather gloves, grabbing my phone and wallet before heading out. I lock the door and step into the deep snow on the stairs.

The snowflakes on the surface of the snow glisten. It makes me think of the car crash—seeing Farah for the first time, the shattered glass covering her like a shimmering dress.

The mix of beauty and threat. Maybe it's what is still drawing me in.

I keep reaching my hand into a car wreckage to grasp onto a venomous flower, just because the flower has amazing tits and an ass that defies gravity.

A snow shovel is set out against the porch. I'd left it there for Nate, the eighteen-year-old son of my housekeeper, who'd needed work, so I hired him for yard work. He'll be here in a couple of hours. He won't do the backyard since it isn't part of his contract.

I recall Farah walking through the heavy snow. I imagine it rising higher, almost to

her knees, and turning cold. I imagine it melting, the cold sinking into her socks.

Her stubbornness would make her wait too long until she'd return to the house. Frostbite, hypothermia, and trench foot. It could lead to worse diseases from a weakened immune system.

But it's the thought of her struggling to walk through the snow to get a glimpse of the deer that makes me grab the shovel and turn around. Not illness or pain, but the persistent discomfort at the thought of her discomfort.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I walk through the mansion. The back door is in a room that branches out from the walk-in pantry. By the time I step out through it, I've warmed up again, and the cold air slices against my face.

I should have gone running. I told myself I wasn't going to care about her—I wasn't going to care if she could see her deer. But here I am, a fucking moron with no spine and a shovel.

The snow is the heavy kind, but the weight doesn't hit me until the sun is rising and I'm nearly out of steam. I let out a huff of breath, watching the condensation form a small cloud before dissipating.

I've thought often about reversing time. To save Olivia. To save Ellie. To be face-to-face with Olivia one more time and apologize for not loving her enough.

But lately, all I think about is preventing Farah from setting that fire.

We'd still have our night together, but she'd never have gone to the Bettiol store. Everything would be different. I could forgive her for the arson, but I can't forgive that my sister was collateral damage. I'm obligated to hate her, and I'm not going to renege on my responsibilities. I owe this to Ellie.

I carve out a small, igloo-like area near the cherry blossom tree. It'll create decent camouflage and keep her warm while she watches the deer.

My hands are soaked to the bone, so cold that it takes some effort to take my hand off the shovel handle. I look back over the path I created. I should regret it, but I can't.

It's always that way with her.

I step back into my house. I pull my gloves off and rub my hands against my pants, but there's still a tingling numbness. Farah should be eating breakfast now, sticking to her schedule to get a peek of the deer. I don't need her to turn shoveling snow into something sentimental, so I move quickly through the kitchen and start my work calls. I won't give her a chance to give me those injured fawn eyes that turn liquid-soft at the smallest act of consideration.

It's probably for the best she's going to prison after this. Out in the world, men would take one look at her and try to twist her into whatever they wanted.

I blow out a breath, jaw tight. I don't want her to suffer for the sake of it. I'm not a monster.

But she tipped the scales too far. Too deep into a world where good people get hurt and the guilty walk free.

Nothing Ellie said or did would've changed what happened. She was always going to get burned.

But I can control what happens now. I can turn the wreckage into something useful—take down the one who did this to her. I owe her that much.

I kick the snow off my shoes and walk through the pantry into the kitchen. I'm prepared to see her—legs twisted around the stool in a way that accentuates her thigh muscles and a spoon gliding out of her mouth, followed by the tip of her tongue, tasting some morsel on the corner of her mouth.

I stop in the kitchen.

She's not here.

She'd usually be eating by now. The deer should be coming around in the next thirty or forty minutes, so she's either going to miss breakfast or miss seeing the deer, and both are important for her.

From my research, the first trimester is the most dangerous. It's not just for the babies, but the risks of changing hormones in the mother, ectopic pregnancy, and a lowered immune system.

She could have caught any kind of infection at her brother's apartment. It's likely, considering his lack of giving a shit about anything other than his next high.

I try to remain calm as I take the steps two at a time to get to the second floor. I take long strides to her hallway. I see the doorless entrance to the room and look into it.

She's run away again. The most prolific and most irritating escape artist since Houdini.

Then I see her. My chest clenches.

Her foot is visible near the bed's leg while her calves are twisted in an unnatural way.

I rush to the other side of the bed, finding her on her stomach with her legs in an awkward position. I drop onto my knees and grip her hip, ready to check for injuries.

Her head whips around, her eyes wide.

"What the hell?" she asks. "Why are your hands so cold?"

"What are you doing on the floor?" I demand. "I thought you'd fallen."

“I’m not an eighty-year-old.” She rolls onto her back, causing my hand to graze against her stomach. “I woke up early and couldn’t fall back asleep, so I started doing some push-ups to try to tire myself out. It worked and I fell asleep. I’ve been building up the energy to get up for the last half hour.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

She grabs my hand, wrapping hers around it—warm and soft.

“Again,” she says. “Your hands are freezing. Were you playing in the snow?”

“Something like that.”

Her thumbs start to rub against the back of my hand. It’s a strange sensation, being tended to. It’s a little less strange that her movements strike a different heat in me.

“It feels like you’re on the brink of frostbite. What were you doing?” she asks.

“Shoveling snow.”

“Don’t you pay that kid to do your yard work?”

“He’s almost the same age as you,” I say. “If he’s a kid, you’re a kid.”

“Still, I know he likes doing the job. He’ll be disappointed when he shows up.”

“He can still do the front. I only did the back.”

“The back?” she asks. “You never go back there.”

“But you do.”

Her thumbs stop rubbing my hand.

“You shoveled for me?” she asks. “That’s... surprising. I mean, thank you.”

“It wasn’t just for you,” I say. “The ground will dry up faster on that path, so if the staff or I need to walk out there, we don’t need to deal with the mud. The creek will probably overflow when the snow melts; it may be necessary to have easy access to it.”

She raises an eyebrow. She starts to rub my hand again, making smaller circles with her thumbs now. It’s relaxing, which feels oddly threatening.

She’s wearing one of my button-up shirts, a dark blue one, with a pair of black sweatpants. On anyone else, it’d look like someone who didn’t care enough to find clothes that fit them and didn’t care how they looked, but on her, it’s addictive. It hides her figure, but it only makes me more curious about how easy they’d be to slip off of her. She looks so small in my clothes, that it triggers a protectiveness in me that makes me want to pull her closer, but pulling her closer will lead me to much less respectable thoughts.

She takes my other hand. She brings it up to her face, blowing a warm exhale against my skin. I could twist my hand around. I could yank her closer. I could get the elastic of those sweatpants down, push myself between her thighs, and fuck her like the room is on fire and I need to use our remaining oxygen to burn with her.

At the very least, Ellie would get her revenge, and all the unwanted thoughts I have of her would die with us.

But I could never do that to her. Despite everything she’s fucked up, I still can’t imagine a world where she wasn’t alive. It doesn’t help that she’s carrying my twins.

This is why I’ll never be able to fuck another woman. I fucked this one and now I’m in a constant state of fucked-up conflict.

I pull my hand away from her and stand up slowly. “Go have breakfast or go back to sleep.”

She leans back on her elbows, glaring up at me. “Why do you feel the need to always boss me around? Don’t you do enough of that at your job?”

“You need an authority figure,” I say. “That should be clear from how your life turned out.”

“My father was very good at ordering me around and I don’t need another version of him.” Her scowl slowly fades as she stares at my feet. I’m still wearing the waterproof shoes, droplets clinging onto the material. “I’d be able to sleep better if I had something to do during the day. I need to keep my brain busy.”

“What did you have in mind?” I ask. “A crossword book?”

She considers me, tilting her head. Her blonde hair cascades over her shoulder, looking soft enough that it needs to be roughed up.

“Rock climbing,” she says. I stare at her.

“There is zero possible way I am going to let you rock climb,” I say. “You may have forgotten, but you’re pregnant.”

She shrugs. “That’s what I want.”

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I consider her. Her bottom lip twitches, a hint of amusement hidden in her features.

She only told me that because she knew I'd say no. She wants me on the back foot, trying to scramble to give her something else that she wants.

"Fine," I say. "We'll do it later. Go eat breakfast."

I pivot, leaving the room without waiting for her response.

I look down at my hands. I can almost still feel her hands on them. It's like a phantom pain, but worse because the missing body parts were never mine.

Ellie isn't the only person Farah burned. The only difference is that I'm always walking straight back into the fire.

Chapter eleven

~FARAH~

After eating breakfast, I'm greeted by the inexplicable scene of men carrying mattresses up the grand staircase.

I don't know if it's a sign of my mind in the gutter or some understanding of Kieran, but my first thought is that Kieran is preparing for an unhinged, room-filled orgy.

I've seen the movies. Wealthy people stave off boredom by getting involved in ritualistic sex parties. Maybe it's less true for other wealthy people, but Kieran seems

like the type to be involved in the most extravagant debauchery.

It shouldn't make me so envious.

Curiosity drives me forward, following behind the men like I'm supervising them.

They don't turn into any of the bedrooms. They don't even turn into the large lounge area.

They go into Kieran's personal gym.

The exercise machines have all been moved against the walls. They place the mattresses underneath the rock climbing wall. From how I'd seen Kieran climbing, it's not for him. It's for me, his delicate, pregnant prisoner.

How the hell did he get mattresses here so quickly? It's been less than an hour. The speed of it is more mysterious to me than the idea of an orgy party.

I try not to think about it, but the thoughts slip in anyway—no matter how hard I try to stay clear of everything my mind keeps chasing about Kieran.

I picture us tangled in the middle of the mattresses, his hands slipping beneath my shirt, warming the skin beneath my breasts as our legs lock together.

The heat between us builds fast, like a clash of weather—cold meeting hot, tension rising, the kind of storm that leaves you breathless.

I shake my head. I have to find him. Tell him the mattresses are unnecessary. Tell him that pregnant women rock climb all the time. Tell him that treating me this way is infuriating—and insanely kind.

I check for Kieran in his office and his bedroom. Not there.

He left.

I should be used to it by now. He sweeps breadcrumbs off his table and I nibble on them, thinking it's a sign of affection. But he'll always leave like I'm the pet he only entertains when he's bored.

I could refuse to see the deer and ignore his efforts to make it easier for me, but even I know that would only make me look childish. Besides, it's the only living thing around here that isn't irritating me.

Maybe I'll trample through the unshoveled snow to get to the cherry blossom tree. I've earned a little bit of time to sulk.

I return to my bedroom and nearly trip over my own feet as some woman is lying on my bed.

Or not a woman.

I press my hand against my chest, feeling my heart rampage in my chest. It's a woman's long white coat draped over the edge of the bed, with three different sizes of white boots displayed underneath it.

He must have gotten someone to deliver them, just like the mattresses.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

It's a strange feeling. This coat and boots were chosen so I'd blend in with the snow when the deer comes around. It's an attention to detail that I almost find unnerving. If I'm that transparent, what else can he see?

Is he judging me for my cowardice as a kid? For my pitiful attempts at redemption as an adult?

How close is he to figuring out the truth about the Bettiol fire?

I pull on the coat. The inside is made of a silk-like material that's initially cold but warms against my skin. As I zip it, it's almost too warm. It should work well outside while I'm stationary.

The boots are sizes 7, 7.5, and 8. The 7.5 fits perfectly.

I trudge down the stairs. As I pass through the kitchen, the dishes I'd washed and put in the strainer have disappeared. I can't be certain if the housekeeping staff is avoiding me or if part of their job is to be invisible.

As I step outside, the backyard is a mix of a winter daydream and an architect's attempt to turn snow into a model for a block of the city. The way Kieran shoveled out a path was so meticulous that I'm tempted to draw lines down the center of it to represent the road and add small squares on the cliff face of the snow to symbolize buildings.

As I shove my hands in the pockets of my coat, my eyes follow the shoveled path. As they reach the cherry blossom tree, my heart somersaults in my chest.

Kieran's crouching near it, looking at me like I'm something rare and untouchable. How is it possible to be treasured in a single gaze?

It must be an illusion caused by the cold and the way the snow shimmers as it falls.

I walk a little faster than I should because the deer could appear at any second. I squat down beside him, the coat saving my knees from getting soaked with melting snow. The snow was piled around us, giving us a small reprieve from the wind.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper. He puts his index finger to his lips and slowly points forward. The deer takes unsteady steps through where a gap in the stone wall allows the creek to flow through. Its dark brown fur and black nose are a stark contrast to the snow, but as its ears flicker and it slowly surveys around it, it feels like an ambassador to this snow-covered Eden.

We quietly watch, less than an inch away from each other, our breathing falling in sync. I can't distinguish between his body heat and mine. I could take his hand and it would feel like taking my own.

The deer bows its head to nibble on the branches of a bush.

"Have you ever watched the deer before?" I mumble, barely moving my lips. The deer's ears twitch and its head jerks up, but after it looks around, it continues to eat.

"No," he says. "I consider it a nuisance. It tears up the yard with its hooves and overgrazes. If it moves a few feet farther, it'll find one of the piles of nuts, fruit, and corn I left it."

"Even though it's a nuisance?"

"I feed you, don't I?" he asks. I try not to smile, forcing on a half-hearted scowl, and I



swear he almost smiles back.

We huddle like two idiots, watching the deer finally find the first pile of treats. I can't suppress a smile this time. Kieran's face is turned too much for me to see if he's smiling too, but it feels like I'm feeling his joy as well.

It's not just the deer. Everything out here is gorgeous. The snow clings to the branches of the trees, making them appear gracefully fragile despite the weight they're carrying. Everything except the area that Kieran shoveled looks like a plush white blanket, pulled tight up to the house. The snow on the large round bushes looks like the sheep I'd count to fall asleep.

But more than that, being here next to Kieran evokes this mood of being in bed on a lazy Sunday with nothing to worry or think about except coffee. And bagels. And sex.

And that thought of dangling on that line between intimacy and recklessness leads to other sensations. It's the same feeling a flower has when the sun hits it, petals unfurling in approval, or a devout believer when they enter holy ground, falling to their knees in awe.

A shiver passes through me. I don't think it's caused by the cold, but by the realization that the closeness to Kieran settles my heart.

I flinch as something drapes over me. Startled, thinking about violence from my childhood, I feel the added warmth of his coat as he places it over my shoulders.

"Sorry," he says, raising his hands in surrender to show he's harmless. As if he could be that. "You looked cold. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," I insist. "It just surprised me."

“I didn’t mean to surprise you then.”

But it is nice. It's been a long time since somebody took care of me. Self-reliance has been an important part of how I conduct myself and, even when I was staying at the homeless shelter, I knew I couldn’t depend on it. Everything comes with a price, and part of that price is a rug that is easily pulled out from under your feet.

I can’t let myself get drawn into wanting him to take care of me. I can’t get attached. He’s easily been able to see through me, so he’ll eventually see that I wasn’t the one who started the fire. He’ll find out it’s Neal and, with his dislike toward him and the fact that Neal isn’t carrying his children, he’ll kill him like he did Robert Young. His rage toward me is barely contained. He’ll tear out Neal’s throat and every other part of him that he can get ahold of.

I was the right scapegoat for the police and I’m the right scapegoat for Kieran.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I just wish that I wasn't.

I need to cut this off now. I can't continue in this spiral of feelings.

I abruptly stand up. The deer's head jerks up. It awkwardly bounces sideways before turning around and dashing back through the hole in the fence.

"I have some things I need to get done," I say. Before he can respond, I rush back down the path.

The cold air sears into my nose. My feet hit against the shoveled path so easily that a moment of gratitude slips in before I can push it back out.

As if the world is punishing me for my lack of appreciation, my foot hits against a puddle of slush. I don't remember seeing it when I first passed through, so it must have melted while we were watching the deer.

My foot kicks up from under me as my other knee jerks from side to side to try to stabilize. It doesn't work. As I fall, I see a glimpse of the sky—bluer than blue, so vibrant I can almost taste it.

But as I crash back down, the pain is black. Sickly, endless black.

Chapter twelve

~KIERAN~

It's terror in a way I haven't experienced since seeing Olivia's head slick with blood.

I run over, feeling like my lungs are constricted. Her legs are splayed at an odd angle. She's not moving.

I drop to my knees, the piece-of-shit slush splattering under my weight. As I reach toward her, her hand grasps her ankle, but she flinches away as soon as she touches it.

"Ow," she mumbles, eyes squeezed shut. I consider unlacing her boots to check how badly she injured her ankle, but the compression of the boot could be keeping some of the pain at bay.

I carefully slip one arm under her knees and the other around her back to pick her up. She still winces, and it's like an electrical current—the pain coursing through me too.

"We need to get to the hospital," I say.

"We can't," she says through gritted teeth. "They'll tell the police that I was there."

"I'll just tell them that you're my pregnant wife," I say. "I'll deal with any fallout."

"They won't—" She stops, her hand moving over her abdomen. Her whole body tenses in my arms. "Did you see how I landed? I didn't hurt the twins, did I? Kieran, if I—"

"You landed on your side," I say. "This isn't your fault. I should have shoveled better. I've lived here long enough that I should've known the snow would melt and create a hazard."

"You shoveled like a deranged person, which we know you are." She pauses. "I'll go for the twins, but if any police come around—"

“I’ll deal with them,” I say firmly.

Adrenaline turns off everything except instinct.

I carry her through the house to the garage. She takes in a sharp breath, seeing the stretch of cement and the rows of vehicles on either side of us. I put her in the passenger side of the Audi, my fastest car that can maintain control in the snow. I bundle up a blazer I had left in the car, making a cushion with it for her to rest her foot on. It should also help prevent it from moving too much when I drive.

As I strap her in, she tries to smile, but I see the edges of pain in her eyes, and it stabs right into my chest.

I carefully, but firmly, close the door and run to the driver’s side.

The garage door opens too slowly, but I take off as soon as I can slip underneath it. The gate is also excruciatingly slow.

What is the point of all of these security measures if the risks are just as dangerous on the inside?

I push the speed limit, dodging between the other cars. I’m certain the other drivers are cursing me out, but they’re irrelevant. They don’t have Farah in their car. They don’t know what’s at stake.

“Kieran,” she says. I glance over. She’s gripping the door’s armrest. “You can slow down. My ankle isn’t going to be any more sprained or broken by the time we get there.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

I slow down, but my mind is still racing, figuring out the fastest route to the ER.

I don't like this.

I don't like the unpredictability.

I don't like the lack of control.

I don't like her being in pain.

But I wouldn't want to be anywhere but here, ensuring that everything is being done to keep her safe and mitigate her pain.

I know the day will come when I'm the threat. One day, she'll find out that it's my sister she left to die in the fire, and she'll know that I always planned to take everything from her—the thief in plain sight robbing the hidden arsonist.

I'll deal with these impulses later. I've got seven months to bury them before I send her to prison. Our twins will be born, and whatever this is between us—it ends.

A clean slate.

At least, that's the lie I keep telling myself.

When terror reaches its peak, it overflows into rage. By the time I stop at the patient intake desk, it takes all of my self-control not to dismantle the door separating me from the physicians.

“My wife slipped on some ice,” I say. “I need her to see a doctor.”

“We need you to fill out these forms.” The woman hands me a clipboard without looking up from her computer. “It’s just personal information, medical history, consent forms, HIPAA—”

“No, she needs to see someone right now.”

She glances up at me. “Sir, I understand your distress, but we have a sys—”

“Do you know what the name on the trauma center of this hospital is?” I demand.

“Sir?” she asks. I wait, less than patiently. “It’s... it’s the Ragdon Trauma Center.”

“I’m Kieran Ragdon,” I say. “So get me a fucking doctor and a room, or my next donation will be to a developer that will turn this hospital into a weed dispensary.”

The woman’s hand hesitates over the phone. A doctor in a white coat strides up to the desk.

“Mr. Ragdon, please accept our apologies. Come back here, and we’ll help your wife.”

He pushes on a blue square button, and the doors that lead deeper into the hospital open. Farah clings to the fabric of my shirt as I carry her, following the doctor through the doors and down a hallway. He stops at a room, flips a plastic flag up beside the doorframe, and indicates for us to step in.

I take Farah inside, laying her down on the bed. Her skin is pale, but she gives me a soft smile.

“I’m currently helping a patient, but I will find another doctor who can assist immediately,” the doctor says. “Thank you for your patience, Mr. Ragdon, and for your donations.”

“If anything happens to my wife that could have been prevented by prompt care,” I say, “I’ll sue this place straight into bankruptcy.”

He nods once. “Understood.”

Leaning close to Farah, it takes me a second to realize she’s still gripping onto my shirt.

“You don’t need to be such a dick,” she murmurs. “I think they believe that I’m your wife. You don’t need the theatrics.”

I slowly loosen her fingers from my shirt, but as they start to tighten again, I let her grip my hand. I’d never considered that anything I was doing was an attempt to convince the hospital staff that she was my wife. I only wanted her to be taken care of, to be prioritized, to not be in pain.

I keep a hold of her hand as I sit on the edge of her bed. I glance over at the whiteboard, where the nurse and doctor will write down their names and jot down any drugs they give Farah. On the other side, a red container with a biological hazard symbol is hanging on the wall.

“Are you worried about the twins?” Farah asks, her voice sounding a bit stronger. “You seem tense.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

“Hospitals are assembly lines of diseases,” I say, my thumb absentmindedly running along her thumb. “It’s statistically likely that you’ll run into someone here with an infectious disease.”

“Ah, so it’s the kryptonite of your constant need for control,” she teases, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “But still, I don’t believe you. If that were the case, you’d be taking control of it by disinfecting every surface. You’d be bathing in hand sanitizer.”

I force a smile at her. She’s right. I skipped the opening of the trauma center, and when I went to see Ellie after the fire, I’d stayed long enough to ensure she was okay and left.

The problem is that Olivia haunts every hospital. Every time I smell that sharp antiseptic, the sound of a curtain being pulled closed around a patient, or the beeping of machines, I’m back to chasing beside her as they wheel her through the hallways.

I’m back to the doctor declaring the time of death, but I could swear I saw her chest move.

“Would you like me to disinfect the whole room?” I ask. For a split second, she squeezes my hand a bit harder.

“No,” she says. “The germs can live for another day.”

I know she is likely healthy. The doctors and nurses will take care of her. I’ve already missed meetings. She would understand if I need to step out until she’s finished.

But looking at her thin fingers pressed over the back of my hand, I don't feel any desire to leave. Olivia's ghost is still here, making the air taste like death and shame, but feeling Farah's skin against mine, it's an occasional inhale of clean air. It's moments of seeing a future instead of the past.

There'll be no future for us, but in these four walls, there is only here and now.

And for here and now, I'll stay.

## Chapter thirteen

~FARAH~

The nurse is so petite that when she tries to help me out of the wheelchair and back into my hospital bed, I'm more worried about falling onto her and shattering her bones than falling to the floor.

As I sink onto the lumpy hospital bed, I glance at the nurse's ID. Kailee. Had she already told me that? The CT scan didn't show any brain damage, but I'm starting to think I've just been too distracted by Kieran's confusing behavior to register anyone else around me.

"Did Kieran leave?" I ask.

"We tried to convince him to stay in the waiting room," she says. "But he refused. He's in the first room we took you to. We've had a nurse updating him through your tests. We're almost finished, and we can bring him back in. I do want to ask you a question before he returns."

"Okay," I say. I look down at the ankle brace. Mild sprain. All of this money for an injury that will be fine in a couple of weeks.

“So.” Kailee pulls over a stool, the wheels squeaking against the floor. “Sometimes, women... well, men and women... will tell us stories about their injuries. They tripped on the stairs. They slipped in the shower. They ran into a wall. Sometimes, those stories aren’t quite true. I want to ask you if your story is true.”

I point down to my ankle. “You know I’m not lying. You’re the ones who told me it was sprained.”

“Oh, no, we don’t think you’re faking an injury,” she assures me. “We just want to ask you... if you feel unsafe around your husband.”

“Unsafe?” I ask. “What? I’m—are you asking me if he’s abusing me?”

“We ask to be safe,” she says, so much earnestness on her face that I almost feel bad for lying to her about being Kieran’s wife. It’s almost funny that she thinks I’m lying about my injury when I’m lying about everything except that.

But is it a lie?

I am a captive. This could be my escape. I could get Kieran questioned by the police and slip away. It would give me at least a couple of hours of a head start. I could return to the mansion and steal and sell what I need to survive.

He’d still be able to track me down. I still don’t know how he did it the first time.

But even if he couldn’t, some part of me is still a prisoner to him. Not always in an unpleasant or undesired way.

“No.” I force a laugh out. “I appreciate your concern, but it’s all true. My husband shoveled out a path forme so I could watch this deer that visits our yard. I went racing back to our house, and I slipped. It’s humiliating, but nobody committed a crime.”

Her eyes search my face for a second longer before she smiles and pops off the stool.

“Well, I’m so glad that’s the case,” she says. “You can change back into your clothes. I’ll get your husband.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:53 pm*

After she leaves, closing the door, I pull my clothes onto my lap. With my hand wrapped around the sweatpants and shirt that Kieran gave me, I remember the feeling of Kieran's hand holding onto mine. It isn't like they say in those paperback romances, where our hands fit perfectly. His hand is disproportionately larger than mine and much rougher, probably from rock climbing and woodworking. We're a contradiction, but when he held onto me, I felt safe.

It's terrifying because I know now that I'd never felt safe before.

And if I consider this safety, what the hell is wrong with me?

As I unfold my pants from the top of my pile, my shirt falls off the top. I look down at it from the height of the hospital bed. For someone who prides themselves on being self-sufficient, this sprain is going to be the death of me.

I lean my weight on my elbow as I lower myself to the floor, snatching my shirt back up. Getting back on the bed is going to be a much more complicated process that could involve a humiliating number of injuries, so I reach my hand up to pull down the rest of my clothes and sit on the floor like I'm a toddler who hasn't quite conquered getting dressed.

I undo the lazy bow on my hospital gown that keeps me from flashing the whole hospital. I try to pull my arm out, but I'm sitting on part of the gown, so my arm becomes trapped halfway in and halfway out of the sleeve.

I wonder if anyone has ever written a Cinderella story where Cinderella leaves a grippy sock behind at the hospital for the prince to match to her feet. After all, who

couldn't fall in love with a woman struggling to get off a piece of clothing that's less than a potato sack?

The door swings open. Kieran slips in, infuriatingly graceful for such a towering man.

He appears more disheveled than I've ever seen him—his hair sticking in different directions, shadows under his eyes, and a fidgety energy to him.

But then I remember what I look like—a t-rex arm, dangling uselessly in a half-opened hospital gown—and I concede that he looks like Prince Charming. He's just one who isn't looking for a match to a hospital sock.

I expect a raised eyebrow and a sarcastic comment, but surprise and concern flood his features and he quickly strides over, kneeling down beside me.

A vague memory of him doing the same thing after I fell threatens to make me feel affection toward him.

"Did you fall?" he asks, his hand touching my arm that isn't in a sleeve-related crisis.

"No, unfortunately, this was on purpose," I sigh, flapping my trapped arm. "Don't worry. I'm a professional at screw-ups. It makes me good at improvisation."

"Is this you being good at improvisation?"

"I was just taking a breather." I shrug, which only further shows how trapped my arm is. "Even the pros need a break once in a while."

"You turned your hospital gown into a straitjacket. It's fitting."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been in the psych ward," I say. "But I'm not surprised

that you're familiar with them."

"Just let me help you."

He offers me his hand, noble enough to offer it to my liberated hand. I reluctantly take it.

He pulls me up to my feet. As we're face-to-face, he drapes my hand on his shoulder so I can steady myself. The back of the gown flutters open.

His hands brush dirt off the back of my thighs. My heart catches in my chest, but before I can think too much about it, he's yanking the sleeve off of my trapped arm, letting the gown drop.

It's dangling from my other shoulder now, but I'm still pressed against him, naked except for my underwear. It's cold in the room and I should feel exposed, but I don't. It's that same sense of safety I've always felt around him, but there's also a sense of taking all of the bad in my life and turning it into dust.

His arm grazes down my body as he leans down to grab my clothes. My hand moves up his arm to his shoulder to maintain my balance. As he stands back up, his arm finds its way back around my waist, as if a gravitational pull exists between us.

Our heads bow close to each other as he helps me to get one leg through the sweatpants. I lean against his chest while he widens the hole of the leg opening for the other side, getting it past the ankle brace. He has this newer spicy, warm fragrance on top of his usual earthy scent.

I could imagine he'd started wearing something scented for me, but that would be a dangerous road to go down.

He pulls the pants up to my waist, letting the elastic band give the smallest snap against my hips.

When I look at him, his eyes are filled with a burning desire that makes it hard to look at and even harder to look away.

How did I let it get to this point?

“The babies are fine,” I breathe.



“The doctor told me.”

“And I’ll find a way to repay you for all of this,” I say. “I know it couldn’t be cheap.”

“I’d consider it an insult if you did.”

I tilt my head toward him, but he ignores it, gathering my bra and helping to pull my arms through it. He clasps it as I lean against the bed.

It leads me to thoughts that I shouldn’t have. The bed frame isn’t fortified enough for the fantasies flitting through my mind.

I need to snap out of it. Think of something sad. Tragic. It shouldn’t be so difficult in a hospital.

“So, you made a large enough donation that they named the trauma center after you,” I mention. “Did you lose someone... from that?”

I remember the name Olivia. I remember the name Robert Young, a name that causes him so much rage it could form a blade or a bullet.

“My sister,” he says. “Olivia. She died in a car accident.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say. “Did you—that must have been horrible.”

“It was.”

He pulls my shirt—his shirt—over my head.

“Is that why you were so nice to me after my car crash?” I ask.

“Olivia did cross my mind,” he says. “Until I saw you. I wasn’t thinking much about my sister after that. You were overwhelmingly vulnerable and needed help, but you look nothing like Olivia.”

He rearranges some of my hair that got messed up as he dressed me.

“You’re something new,” he says. And I feel like it for the first time.

Kieran drives, one hand on the wheel, leaning back into the driver’s seat—but not like the college boys where they’re trying to prove how relaxed they are. It’s very natural to him. To an almost concerning level, especially when he hasn’t said a word since we left the hospital.

I hadn’t realized we’d been in the hospital so long. Night has crawled through the roads, giving Chicago the appearance of a moody nightclub.

I should thank him for being with me in the hospital that long, especially when the hospital seemed to be a place that he’s repelled by.

But words seem redundant at this point.

At night, downtown Chicago has the same lit-up traffic signs, streetlights, and illuminated skyscraper offices as every other city, but it’s also darker than other cities. At least, from what I’ve seen in photos and the movies. It should make everything seem more threatening or depressing, but I prefer it. It makes the colored lighting more vibrant and the skyscrapers appear darker, which causes the bright office windows to look more like levitating rooms. It makes you wonder what the

person inside is doing—hustling to impress his boss? Rereading her notes for the meeting in the morning? Loosening his tie for the secretary as her dress pools at her feet?

I've missed Chicago. At first, I preferred being in the small town without the constant noise of cars, honking, and sirens. I loved how much easier it was to walk around without worrying about all of the strangers on the sidewalk, but some part of me is always here. Some part of me needs the tension and the darkness.

I just don't know if I can stay. Because of the police. Because of the man driving me and the way he divides me into several contrasting people, who are feeling more and more like they're all the genuine version of me.

As I see the red brake lights ahead and police lights flashing, I sink lower into my seat. It's unlikely the police would be looking inside cars for an arson case from two and a half months ago, but I'm not going to risk it.

But Kieran turns before we reach that point. I let out a slow breath, sitting up again.

"Aren't we going in the opposite direction from your house now?" I ask.

"We are."

He doesn't expand, and I don't feel the need to make him. There are fewer cars this way. It's a little more time that I have with him, where neither of us can find an excuse to leave.

I close my eyes. If he's going the long way back home, I might as well rest.

The rhythm of the car lulls me. I hadn't noticed Kieran putting the heated seat on, but I feel it spreading across my back, melting me further into rest.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

When the car coasts to a stop, I open my eyes. I must have fallen asleep because we're in the middle of an enchanted realm that blends a natural utopia with an aurora borealis of fairy lights.

A large fountain with water jetting upward has lights that make the water visibly blue even in the dark. A man-made waterfall behind it has scattered white lights that glint on and off like fireflies. A large tree casts a shadow over the fountain and waterfall, with streams of lights dripping from its branches.

Further to the left, a small pond has glowing lights inside it, which fade in and out, making it look like waves are swaying back and forth inside it. A walkway that starts at the parking lot spirals around the tree and circles around the lake. Small lights in different shades of blue are inserted inside the walkway, giving it an appearance like a river.

It's so mesmerizing that it takes a minute for my eyes to land on the sign—Astasio Botanical Garden. Not quite the fairy world, but it feels close enough.

"I've never been here," I admit.

"It's a bit tucked away. I don't think the people who know about it want the tourists here," he says.

"Are you one of those people?"

"It's not my kind of thing. But I thought that you'd like it."

“I do.”

He’s gazing at me for so long, I have to look back at him.

“We need to keep our relationship strictly platonic,” he says. “We can’t keep blurring thatline.”

I focus on the lights in the pond, watching the illusion of waves. “I know.”

“It’s my fault that we haven’t been, but we need to deal with this logically,” he says. “It will never work out. We’ll never get along, and it’ll be confusing for the twins.”

Maybe the lights are too much. Maybe when nighttime comes, we should accept it and not try to create light where there isn’t any.

“I agree,” I say.

“Good.” He grips the steering wheel, glancing over at me. “Does your foot hurt? That looks uncomfortable.”

I look down at my foot. I must have turned it in my sleep. It’s now angled inward like I’m pigeon-toed.

“It’s fine,” I say. “It doesn’t bother me.”

“It’s not a short ride back home,” he says. “You don’t want to be uncomfortable the whole time.”

He reaches across my lap, his hand cradling under my calf as he moves my foot back to where he’d put it before.

The touch is tinder for the fire in my veins.

As he sits back up, I grab his arm. He looks up at me.

My hands cradle his face. I press my mouth against his, urgent and riddled with anxiety.

It's not Chicago that I was homesick for.

He's the contrast between familiar and exhilarating.

He's the darkness and vivid colors I missed.

Chapter fourteen

~KIERAN~

My mind moves through building and tearing down empires so fast, the real world feels too slow. It's boring, predictable—nothing holds my attention when I already see how everything starts and ends.

But with Farah, everything is worth attention.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I notice where my fingertips brush against the curve of her shoulder. I notice the curves of her palm as it grips onto the back of my neck, pulling me closer. I notice the way her nose nudges against mine when she kisses me deeper.

I notice the way my hand moves down to her ass, pulling her closer, and she urges me on, her breasts pushing up against me as she tries to get closer.

My eyes flicker toward her injured ankle. She presses against my cheek.

“I’m fine,” she breathes. “Please. Just do what you want.”

I kiss her again, her breath slipping out as our mouths collide.

It’s more than the sensation against my mouth, it’s more than friction and the feeling of my thumb against her throat, her artery fluttering against my skin.

It’s destruction and rebirth. Like building empires with our hands and seeing the whole kingdom reflected in her eyes.

Her hands move to my pants, unzipping them. I grasp her hands, stopping her.

“It’d be an ambitious idea to do this here,” I say. “But it’s not practical for someone as large as me.”

She glances around the car like there could be a spot where we could move more easily, but she’s not going to find one. She looks at me, biting her lip.

I should tell her we could fuck in the botanical garden, but if we got caught and charged with indecent exposure, I'm certain she'd choose to stay in prison rather than go home with me.

A slow smile crosses her face. "You know, I owe you."

"For?"

"For... what we did on your stairs," she says. "I've never— I've still never... gone down on a man."

My erection is instant. It could be from her words, but it could also be from her expression, which crosses boundaries between self-consciousness and curiosity.

And that mouth is a bowtie, a perfect accessory for my cock.

She notices the tent in my pants. I release her hands, and she unbuttons and unzips me.

When she takes ahold of my cock, her gaze is on it like it's already in her mouth, it's enough to nearly send me to the edge.

Her blonde hair sways forward, creating a curtain between us. I pull it back with my hand, keeping it out of her face. I'm not going to miss watching her.

She gives me a shy glance before her tongue slides over the tip.

It's a timid lick, like someone trying a new food, but the way the tip of her tongue flicked upward could drive me straight to an asylum.

Her tongue becomes more confident as it continues around the head and down my



length. She's so good I wouldn't believe that this was her first time if it weren't for the small hesitations in her movements, which only makes it harder to not explode.

She has to open her mouth all the way to take in the head of my cock, her tongue fluttering underneath it. A low, guttural sound rumbles out of me. I place my hand on the back of her head. I don't add any pressure, but she takes in more of my cock, her tongue continuing to tease underneath it.

My breathing gets more inconsistent. Steam is forming on the window. Her head is bobbing up and down, leading to a pleasure that's borderline violent. I could bite my own tongue off now and not even notice.

I do notice her hand, slipping under the waistband of the sweatpants I gave her. The faster her hand moves, the faster her lips glide against my cock.

Usually I'm selfish. I take what I want without any guilt over not giving back.

But if anyone is going to pleasure her, it's me.

I put my hand under her chin, pushing until her mouth slips off my cock, a thin strand of saliva trailing off her lips.

Jesus Christ.

"Get on me," I order, but before she can even react, my hands are on her waist, pulling her over to the driver's seat. I'm careful about her ankle, but she seems to have forgotten about it completely as she drags it across the center console to straddle me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

Her head is bowed to prevent it from hitting the ceiling of the car. I pull her shirt off, rough enough to make her gasp, my knuckles grazing the curve of her ribs.

Her breath catches when I drag the fabric over her head.

Her bare breasts press against my chest, full and flushed, the kind of perfect that makes a man lose his mind.

Her skin is warm, her nipples tightening under my gaze. I take one into my mouth, sucking slowly as my tongue rolls over the sensitive peak. Her back arches, soft sounds catching in her throat, but I want more than a taste. I want every part of her.

I pull the lever on the seat, causing us both to abruptly decline. Her breasts hit against my chest as her lips linger close to mine. I drop my hand between us and shove her sweatpants down over her hips.

I hiss when I feel how wet she is.

“Fuck,” I mutter, gripping her ass. “You’re killing me.”

I grasp my cock. She raises her hips.

The moment I slam into her, her back arches and she gasps. I put my hand on the back of her neck, pulling her close enough to mark her with a nip near her jaw. Her hips roll against me in a desperate rhythm, her body pressing, demanding more. I grip her tighter, every muscle straining to keep command. We’re locked in the same hunger.

I put my hands on her hips, only maintaining enough self-control as I fuck her to stop her head from hitting against the car's ceiling. Her hair bounces against her shoulders and against my chest, a blessing of gold strands between us. She's biting her bottom lip and squeezing her eyes shut, still trying to rock her body against me as I lift her up and down.

I don't want anybody else to have her. Ever.

I want to give her everything. I want to take everything.

I want her body. Her children. Her heart.

I've never wanted something that I didn't hunt down and capture—not business, not pleasure, not revenge.

Farah cries out. I stop for a split second, until I feel her pussy pulsing around my cock, tightening so possessively around me that it's hard to keep bouncing her body on me. But as she trembles over me, resting her head on my shoulder, and her hot breath presses against my jaw, it feels like the victory I've wanted.

With a growl and a tight grip on her ass, I come hard inside her.

The car's filled with steam and heat and her scent.

My cock's still buried deep, her chest heaving against mine.

And I've never unraveled like that before.

It wasn't just release. It was surrender.

My breathing starts to slow. Her hair is tickling against me. She hasn't moved. It's

quite possible she's fallen asleep because her eyes are closed. I keep as still as possible, but that only allows my mind to race. It allows my mind to consider the empires I'm building and destroying right now.

Yes, I want her.

But this is a betrayal toward Ellie.

This is the woman who injured her.

It will also end up being a betrayal toward Farah. I've been hiding the fact that Ellie—Helena, as Farah knows her—is the victim of her arson. Once she learns the truth, she'll burn us to the ground.

I'm betraying Olivia too. I'd felt half-alive since she'd passed until Farah crashed into me. She was a ghost haunting that hospital because she knows I let the memory of her slide away from me to chase my own selfish pleasure.

I need to tell Farah the truth. I need to demand the truth out of her.

I concentrate on her breathing, but she's definitely asleep.

I'll ask her later.

I turn my head enough to look out the window. The steam from the car has made the Christmas lights decorating the botanical garden look like distant stars.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I close my eyes. When the sun comes up, the Christmas lights won't be visible. In the morning, I'll know what's real and what dims at the slightest scrutiny.

### Chapter fifteen

~FARAH~

In those time loop films, the hero figures out how to become a better, happier, more caring person. A person would have to be a fool to not learn after repeating the same action and getting the same result.

Instead of repeating the same day, it's the same pattern. Kieran hasn't vanished this time, but he may as well be a phantom. He must be the one who is sending house staff to make sure I always take my pain medications and that I do my physical therapy, and I'll catch glimpses of him, but I may as well be a wilting wallflower by the way he looks right through me.

It's the same thing as when we slept together last time. I've been used, and I let myself be used.

Multi-layered, tear-causing, and bitter. I'm a sack of onions.

I stride through his hallways, arms crossed in a way that I'd find embarrassingly juvenile, but I'm already so humiliated that I could throw a tantrum and it'd only be a small scrape to my ego.

I need a distraction. Shame and boredom aren't a great mix, and they've both taken

over like weeds among a flowerbed of weeds that I haven't tended to since Kieran and I were at the botanical garden.

I wish I were an arsonist. I'd burn that garden to the ground in the wild hope it'd erase it from my mind too.

I pause in front of Kieran's personal gym. The mattresses are still stacked underneath the wall. They're staggered, so it's easy enough to climb onto.

I'd thought it was a gesture of kindness, but maybe I didn't understand the joke was on me.

Weak, fragile little Farah.

Can't be trusted to walk without her crutches, despite the pain only being a small ache now.

Couldn't possibly climb up a wall without smashing her empty head on the floor.

My thoughts are so razor-sharp, I know they're irrational, but the anger pushes out all other thoughts—the weeds choking out every rational, nuanced flower with a vengeance.

I step onto one of the mattresses. It bends under my weight, but only enough that I can see an outline forming around my foot. Memory foam. I don't know if I should be impressed by him spending so much money or if it's a sign that the conspiracy theory about mattress stores being owned by the mafia is true.

I only nearly stumble once as I get to the top of the mattresses. Unlike other climbing walls, the handholds aren't bright colors. They're different shades of brown and gray. They also seem less prominent than other ones I've seen, lacking any obvious place

to grip onto. It must make it more realistic, which includes the unfortunate side effect of making it more difficult.

I grip onto two of the handholds. I move my left foot onto a lower rock. I take a deep breath, pushing up on my left foot to reach higher and grab the next handhold. My right foot presses against one of the footholds. I'm pulling myself up, but my ankle feels like a metal spindle is inside it, pressing against the muscles and nerves in a way that's difficult to ignore.

But not impossible.

I keep pulling myself up, putting as much strain as I can on my arms and left leg to give my right ankle some relief, but the pain still nauseates me.

I hate feeling helpless, but it's a feeling that has permeated every day of my life. With a violent father, a drug-addict brother, and now a man who has the power to wring every last drop of freedom from my life, I've always been a fallen leaf, floating wherever the river takes me.

Hands grip around me, yanking me downward. But instead of falling, the hands spin me enough that I end up in the crook of Kieran's arms. Anger creases his features, his mouth twisted into a scowl that's deep enough to make my heart skip several beats.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demands. "You're pregnant and you have a sprained ankle."

I lift my chin up, hoping the shivers inside me can't be felt in his arms. "I didn't think you cared. You've barely said a word to me."

"Do I need to use words to tell you to not injure yourself? To not risk killing yourself?"

My heart is still beating wildly in my chest, but as I stare up at him and feel his tight grip around me, I'm overwhelmingly certain he's not going to hit me or turn me in to the police. I know I'm a big enough fool that I should cling to my doubt, but despite knowing that, I start to relax.

"I told you I wanted to do it—" I start.

"That was before you hurt your ankle."

"Can you just set me down?" I ask, a request that I don't want.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

But he slowly kneels down, placing me down like a porcelain doll with my legs out in front of me. I press my hands down at my sides, preparing to stand back up, but after all of the effort with the rock climbing wall, it feels like the mattress is offering me residency, and I don't want to deny such a kind offer.

When I let myself fall back, my hair fanning out behind my head, Kieran leans over to lie down beside me.

“Has anyone told you that you're a handful?” he asks.

“I'm usually not,” I say. “I'm usually annoyingly docile.”

“I can't imagine that. Who are you if you're not constantly trying to throw yourself out windows or use an impaired ankle to climb up a wall without a safety harness?”

I frown. It's a legitimate question. Maybe I'm not a fallen leaf with him.

Maybe I'm a fallen seed, burrowed deep in the soil, and something new could force its way out.

But I can't allow it to.

He reaches forward, his fingertips touching my cheek. His arm leaves a faint imprint on the mattress.

We could leave a million imprints on these mattresses. I want people to know we were here. That for a moment—before he decides to reject me like he always

does—that I had him. That I held enough control to keep ahold of something I wanted.

“The twins are yours,” I admit. “There was nobody else.”

“I know,” he says, a faint smirk playing on his lips. I roll my eyes.

“Well, don’t be too cocky about it.”

He shrugs. “It wouldn’t have mattered if they were biologically mine or not. I took responsibility for them the moment I took you in.”

“The moment you kidnapped me.”

“However you want to define it, the result is the same,” he says. “Blood is blood, but one of my sisters is my foster sister. I don’t see her as any less my sister than Olivia was.”

“You have another sister?” I ask, propping my head up on my hand. “I thought men who were surrounded by sisters were usually kind, gentle souls.”

“Olivia had a wild streak. Ellie’s the same. If anything, they’re the reason I never stood a chance at turning out normal.”

I smile, but my breath stops short. “Ellie? I thought Ellie was your girlfriend?”

“You’ve been sleeping with me when you thought I had a girlfriend?” he asks, a grin unfurling across his face.

“Okay, that’s not fair,” I protest, my cheeks turning bright red. “I wouldn’t even know if I hadn’t been eavesdropping.”

“You’re not helping yourself.”

I press my palm against my cheek, feeling how warm it is. “I heard you talking with that event planner. It just sounded like you loved her a lot.”

“I do love Ellie. As my sister,” he says. “And that wasn’t an event planner. That was her fiancé, Henry. That event is an engagement party for the two of them.”

I let out a slow breath, smiling back at him, though mine is tied much more closely to relief.

“So, you thought you were my mistress?” he prompts. “Should I hide you in a closet?”

“Your closets are big enough to be rooms,” I say. “At least they would have a door.”

“We’ve had sex on the stairs and in a car in a public place. Privacy doesn’t seem like a huge concern of yours.”

He reaches over, tugging on my sweatpants until they’re an inch lower. He caresses my hip, his hand drifting down my thigh. He stops midway, frowning.

“What?” I ask.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

He moves too quickly for me to react, his hand slipping into my pocket. He pulls the compass out, raising an eyebrow at me.

“You told me you sold this,” he says. “Fifty dollars, if I recall correctly.”

I sheepishly shrug. “I lied. I took it to a pawn shop, but I liked that it reminded me of that night. When I rear-ended a kind soul who made me feel alive. You know, the guy I met right after you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and stick my tongue out, trying to not laugh at my own joke. As I start to open my eyes, my tongue slipping back into my mouth, he kisses me. I start to kiss him back, he pulls me closer to him, our legs twisting together in an imperfect knot.

Not bad for two fools.

Sex isn't what I thought it would be.

I didn't have many school friends—Neal's reputation was a deterrent toward the types of people I'd be friends with—but the few women I'd gotten to know made sex sound transactional.

It wasn't that different from ancient times. A virgin was sacrificed on the altar to get a god—or what the woman considered to be her god—to give her what she wanted. And what she wanted was that glowing, golden, consecrated love.

Of course, it never lasted. No matter how many times you gave yourself up, gods

were easily bored by mortals.

But with Kieran, it isn't like that.

It's open mouths and teasing tongues. I'm not sacrificing anything to him. I'm anything but holy and clean—I'm greedy, taking everything I want, while he is depraved, corrupting my sense of self by pressing his tongue against my slit and claiming my clit with the slow, sinful drag of his tongue. His hands keep my thighs spread wide, his mouth slow and thorough, driving me wild with the patience of a man who plans to ruin me completely. His tongue flicks and circles, dipping lower and then rising again to that aching spot until my hips buck and I moan shamelessly. I reach down, fisting his hair, pulling when the pressure becomes too much. He doesn't stop. Not until I'm breathless and trembling.

With my clothes and the compass discarded around us, he rises over me.

His knees dig into the mattress, anchoring him between my thighs. Without a word, he grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head in one fluid motion. His torso is cut from muscle and shadows—broad chest, defined abs, and a trail that draws my gaze lower. Power coils beneath his skin, every inch of him carved for sin.

His eyes darken with hunger as he reaches for his belt. The sound of the buckle coming undone is a sharp, metallic promise. He keeps his gaze locked on me as he pulls the leather free and unzips his pants with deliberate control, every motion infused with tension.

His eyes never leave mine, charged with possession and need. It pins me in place, leaves me open, exposed—and aching for everything he's about to give me.

When he wraps a hand around himself and strokes once, my breath catches. He's thick, long, and already so hard it makes my thighs press together in a desperate

pulse. He's not just ready—he's showing me exactly who I belong to.

I try to pull him closer, my legs twisting around his legs and my hands gripping the firmness of his upper arms. As he lowers himself, I feel myself sink deeper into the mattress. It's still softer than I'd ever expect it to be, but the weight of Kieran's body against me is even more of a comfort.

This is new. While I still want him, need him, completely and desperately, there is a mirror to that desire. I am protected. I am treasured to the point that I couldn't even fracture myself without him holding me tight enough that the pieces wouldn't fall away from each other.

When he pushes inside me, my head falls back, looking up at those handholds on the rock climbing wall. I may as well be climbing, because that's what it feels like as he moves—deep, steady, possessive—slower than the other times, but it's slower in the way like waves breaking against the shore instead of a tsunami crashing down.

He buries himself again and again, each stroke hitting places that make me gasp and cling to him. My heels dig into his lower back. His groan rumbles against my neck as he dips down to kiss the hollow of my throat, his breath hot against my skin.

It's not adrenaline flooding my body, but a kind of awe for the way the world works.

The intensity builds. The waves start to crash down faster. His hips slam harder, my nails carving red lines down his back. And just when I think I'll fall apart, his hand finds my face, anchoring me. And he kisses me.

It's slow, almost reverent. Like he's giving me something fragile, something that lives in the space between our mouths. I can almost taste it, a sweetness that tingles on my tongue.

He looks down at me. My heart tumbles in my chest.

Oh.

This is intimacy. This is what makes people soft, makes people crazy, makes people run.

It's insane to think this isn't what created the twins. It should be. It's enough to make two beating hearts. It's enough to breathe life into a million newborns.

It's enough to make me shatter in a way that he can't even stop.

The orgasm surges through me, a whole ocean of tides taking me to the edge of the world. It's so good that I can barely breathe. My body tenses enough that it would hurt if the pleasure weren't pushing every other feeling out.

Kieran curses above me, his body jerking as he spills inside me. He holds himself there, buried deep, his arms shaking as he slowly starts to come down. He takes deep breaths before his body starts to relax, and my body answers his stillness.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I place my hands on his arms, pretending to push him over, and he lets me, settling down to the left of me.

“Some of your house staff might think you were in trouble,” I say. “From how much you were cursing God.”

“I wasn’t cursing God,” he says. “I’m very grateful toward any higher power right now.”

“I don’t think goddamn is a sign of gratitude,” I tease.

“Well, the staff isn’t here, so they couldn’t have been that concerned.”

“Maybe they were watching when we weren’t looking,” I say. “You seem like the type that would hire peepers.”

“Only for the gardeners.” He runs his fingers through his hair. The sweat makes it protrude upward. “I don’t think you’re one to judge, Farah. You’ve eavesdropped on every conversation you could. With Ellie and I, with my future brother-in-law...”

I laugh. “Yeah, I’ve learned to not do that. Sometimes, you hear things you don’t need to hear.”

“Such as?”

I raise my eyebrows. Normally I’d run my mouth. But now, considering it, I’m not exactly sure this is the right time.



“You’re hesitating,” he remarks. “I can’t imagine what I said that would steal away the defiance in Farah Todd.”

I tuck my hair behind my ear. “Well, it’s complicated.”

“Yes, because our relationship before this has been simple.”

“Robert Young,” I blurt. “You talked about having closure because he’s dead.”

Surprise ripples across his face, but a guardedness quickly replaces it.

“Yes,” he states. “I do have closure over that.”

“I just...” I take a deep breath. “I don’t know what that means.”

He considers me. From the tension in his shoulders, I expect him to stand up and leave, return to our pattern of him acting like I don’t exist after we’ve slept together.

But he doesn’t move.

“I’d always told Olivia that if she drank at a party to call me, so I could drive her home. I made it clear that if she didn’t do that, I wouldn’t forgive her. She always called me.” He looks down at the space between us, where some of the mattress is starting to restore itself and forgetting where our bodies’ imprints were. “One night, I was driving her home. Robert Young, a drunk fucker, crossed the center line. He didn’t even have his headlights on. I swerved to avoid him, but he hit the back of the car. Olivia and I slammed into a telephone pole. Olivia died shortly after we got her to the hospital. Robert Young died instantly.”

I let out a slow breath and reach for his hand. Kieran hadn’t killed him. I expect Kieran to pull away, but he flips over his hand, so my fingertips brush against this

palm.

It's strange how tragedies happen without any reason or connection between the perpetrator and the victim. Like Helena Porter and how she became a victim just because I felt the need to call Neal. I made an innocent woman pay for my weakness. For my lack of good judgment.

The tension in my body eases as Kieran leans forward, his kiss rough enough to grind down the abrasive thoughts in my mind.

I'd felt divided between a coward and a loose cannon, but lying beside him, it doesn't feel like I'm split in two. He didn't make me reckless; it was a part of me that'd buckled under the weight of my fear of my father and my responsibility toward my brother. He'd lifted the weight and pulled it off like it was a jacket that I'd put on to protect me from the explosions of other men in my life.

He scoops up the compass in one hand and lays down on his stomach. Possessed by the braver side of myself, I trace his shoulder muscles, then let my fingers trail down his spine. He looks over at me with a smile that's more real than anything outside this room.

He rests his chin on his arm. "You're more than I could have ever asked for."

"You did say I was a handful."

"That's true," he says, caressing my arm. He watches his hand like he can't quite believe our skin is touching. "But in a good way. Your chaos and your kindness are unexpected and necessary. I've never met someone that I can just lie next to and not be thinking about clients or revenge or how to get her out of my house."

"Yes, you've made it very apparent you don't want me out of your house," I tease.

He leans forward and I kiss him. It's a quick, flirty kiss, but as I pull back, his arm tightly wraps around me, yanking me closer so he can kiss me harder. His hands grip my ass, his mouth opening my mouth, and my breasts pressed against his chest. My hands move to his neck. When a slow rumble passes through him as my thigh slides between his thighs, I feel it against my palm.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

We could stay here all day, getting so familiar with each other that we could never wash each other off.

Kieran's phone pings loudly. He kisses me deeply once more before slowly getting up. I gently pull back down on his shoulder.

"Ignore it," I plead.

"It's the surveillance system," he says, squeezing my hand before gently placing it down on the mattress. "It's probably just an animal, but I still need to check."

As he grabs his pants to find his phone, I enjoy the view of his back again. I wish I'd traced more of it while he was lying here. I wish I'd drawn up a pact on his skin, making him promise that I'd be more than a flicker of a memory, no matter what happened.

He turns back toward me and I can already feel how flimsy the moment is.

"What?" I ask.

"It's your brother." He stands up, grabbing his boxer briefs and pants. He yanks them up, the simmering anger apparent in his harsh movements. "I'll deal with him. Stay here."

"Wait." I quickly stand up. "I want to talk to him."

"No," he states, barely glancing at me. "Did you already forget what happened when

you visited him? I'll deal with it."

"What happened isn't his fault," I say. "He's my brother. I'll talk to him."

"Farah," he sighs. "You don't understand—"

"I understand my brother very well," I interject. "You're the one who doesn't understand. My father... my father was a piece of shit. Whenever I did something that would make him mad—which could be anything—Neal would redirect that anger toward him. And that messed Neal up. He started doing drugs to cope with everything. Everything he's going through, it's because of me."

"It's not because of you."

"It is." I grab my clothes, yanking them on just as roughly as he'd taken them off. "We could talk around it all day. I understand my father is responsible for what he did, but it doesn't change how I feel about Neal. I owe him."

"You don't owe him anything," Kieran says, his hands clenched at his sides. "He made his own choices. He's older than you. He—"

"Stop, Kieran," I say. "Watch what you say about him. He's my brother."

Kieran lets out a heavy breath, glancing over at the doorway. I expect him to storm away and throw Neal out like he's desperate to do, but he doesn't move.

"I don't care what Neal does," he says. "Unless it involves you. He's a threat to you. He got you into that situation with the drug deal. That whole thing could have been far worse, and he doesn't... he isn't capable of prioritizing you right now."

"Whether or not I care about people isn't dependent on if they can prioritize me," I

say. “And that situation with the drug dealer wasn’t that bad. I owe Neal. At the very least, I owe him a conversation that doesn’t include you.”

Fully dressed now, I stride past him, avoiding his gaze. As I’m about to pass through the door, I feel his grip on my arm. It’s not tight and he doesn’t yank on me, but it’s enough to make me stop. I look up at him.

“For two months, I searched for you,” he says. “I knew your full name from before, but even with all of my resources, I couldn’t find you. You weren’t using any credit cards, you weren’t using a cell phone, and you didn’t keep in contact with your roommate. You were a ghost. I was desperate to find you.”

My heart is pounding in my chest. The puzzle pieces start to fall into place. I want to place my hand over his mouth and stop him from talking, but my hands are frozen at my sides.

“From my research, I knew about your brother’s addiction. I went to him. I offered him a fix. He resisted for less than ten minutes. He let me listen to all the voicemails you left him. He let me write down the number to your burner phone.”

“I don’t believe you,” I bite out. I shake my arm loose from him and continue out into the hallway. I try to push away his words, but they crowd inside my head.

Neal was the only one who knew where I was. Kieran is intimidating, I know that more than most, but if Neal had known about that, he would have wanted to protect me from him.

Neal couldn’t have cared less that I was Kieran’s prisoner.

It’s nothing new, so it shouldn’t hurt.

But it was the last strand holding me up.

Chapter sixteen

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

~KIERAN~

My library armchair faces the bar cart—a quiet nod to the fact that I probably reach for the bourbon more than the books. But honestly, I’ve gotten pretty good at doing both.

I’ve brought over a book on the history of the construction of the Crystal Palace, but my attention keeps returning to the surveillance video on my phone.

On the screen, Farah has her arms crossed as Neal holds his hands over his chest and his mouth rapidly moves. The surveillance system picks up the low rumble of his voice, but only an occasional word is clear enough to understand.

I take a gulp of my whiskey.

They’ve been at it for nearly twenty minutes now. Farah grabbed a coat before she went out, but I still worry about the cold. I still worry about her ankle, though she’s leaning against a pillar.

I never should have told her that it was him outside. I should have just lied back down beside her, pulled her so close to me that the rest of the world disappeared. Neal wouldn’t have been able to get inside the house. He would’ve died from exposure before being able to become a threat to Farah.

I need to turn back time. I need to close the doors, lock them forever, and I’ll keep her to myself. I’ll protect her from these liars and thieves.



But isn't she a danger herself? Couldn't she burn us down?

I'd let her.

She could burn down everything I have and everything I am. And the way she looked at me when I told her the truth—I might as well be what's left after the fire.

I look over my shoulder at the library's shelf, where Ellie had hidden the mini replicas of the buildings Henry had designed. The engagement party is in three days. With the chaos of Farah's ankle injury and everything between us, the calendar slipped away from me.

I can't let Ellie and Farah encounter each other. If Ellie finds out that I've been harboring Farah, it will break her heart. If Farah finds out that I'd hidden the fact that the one she injured was my sister, she'll run.

I sit up as I hear the door open and close. On my phone, I see Neal walking away from the house. I exit out of the app.

Farah pauses outside the door of the library. She turns slowly to look at me.

"Did you ask him about giving up your location?" I ask.

"No," she says. "I don't need to."

She walks toward me, eyeing the liquor wistfully. I pick up the glass beside mine, holding it up for her. She looks at it, one brow raised, touching her stomach.

"It's not liquor," I say. "I got you some apple juice from the kitchen."

"You knew I'd come and sit with you?"

“I’d hoped.”

She takes the glass and sits down in the chair on the other side of the bar cart. She takes a sip from the glass. She looks down at the juice, rotating the bottom of the glass against her palm.

“He was still very young when he became an addict,” she says. “I remember being eight and I already associated the smell of marijuana with him. It wasn’t long after that when he started doing harder drugs. I know how easy it is to say that it’s not my responsibility, but he’s been the one pillar in my life and he loves me. I know it doesn’t look like that now, but he used to be a great brother. He could be an asshole like all brothers, but he took on the responsibility of raising me and making me feel cared for. I just want to reciprocate. I never want him to feel like he isn’t loved or that I won’t be there for him.”

“I can understand that,” I say. “You’re not responsible, but I know that feeling of responsibility for a sibling. I felt it for a long time. I’ve imagined myself in that driver’s seat and considered over and over if I could have saved Olivia’s life if I’d turned the other way or if I’d been going a little slower or a little faster. I wonder if I’d done everything right while doing chest compressions or if I shouldn’t have moved her out of the seat. It used to fill me with so much rage that I avoided Ellie because I didn’t want her to see that. It’s because of you that I’m learning to put that anger aside.”

Her mouth twists into a half-smile. “How exactly am I doing that? It’s not like I don’t frustrate you.”

“You do,” I say. “But you also make me question things—like whether people are only the sum of their worst mistakes.”

She takes another sip of her juice, her gaze sliding down to her feet.

“I wish I could tell you everything about that night, but I don’t think I can yet. Maybe after the twins are born and I can get drunk off of more than apple juice.”

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” I say.

I mean it. If she thinks too much about it, she might realize that I’ve been so angry because Helena is Ellie. That she injured my sister.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“I just remembered while I was sitting here—the engagement party is in a few days. People are going to be coming in and out of the house to decorate and the party will be full with people. Why don’t we stay in a hotel during it?”

“For your sister’s engagement party?” she asks, raising an eyebrow. “At your house? You can’t skip it.”

“I’ll make a brief appearance,” I say. “It’s more for her than anything. She knows how I feel about parties.”

She rubs the glass against her wet bottom lip.

Goddamn.

“And you want me to go back in public?” she asks. “The Chicago police are still looking for me.”

“I’ll keep you hidden from prying eyes.”

She looks at me. I could swear her green eyes get a little bit softer.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll trust you.”

The hotel balcony overlooks Lake Michigan, where the chaos of the city—

The balcony is split into three spaces—a lounging area with a circular stone fireplace, an alcove shaded by a metal pavilion shaped like oversized leaves with a matching

leaf-shaped dining table, and a jacuzzi that resembles a circular pool with sleek glass siding.

When Farah slips into it, only wearing a T-shirt and underwear, I know I chose the righthotel for us.

The shirt billows around her before it darkens as the water soaks into it. She whips off the shirt, throwing it over the side of the jacuzzi. It makes a wet slapping sound as it hits the ground, but I can't afford it any attention when Farah is taking off her bra as well. Her breasts are half-submerged in the water, turning this balcony into paradise.

I start undressing as she tries to catch the bubbles surging across the surface.

When I plunge in beside her, the water feels much warmer than it is because of how quickly the temperature is dropping as the sun sets. I press up close to Farah near the edge of the jacuzzi, looking out at the lake.

The lights from the skyscrapers paint the water, creating soft lines of a dozen different colors that make small enough movements that they seem to be breathing. The sky almost seems to be turning a dark purple.

I only notice all of these things because I keep looking over at Farah and see how in awe she is. Beauty has always been something for me to possess—to spend anight with it and be close enough to become less impressed by it—but with her, I know it was something less than beauty that I was possessing, because every time I look at her, it takes my breath away again. Her beauty doesn't diminish the more I see her; it becomes more striking.

I'd asked the staff to leave us some wine and sparkling juice, which sits in an ice bucket beside the jacuzzi. I pour us each a glass. She takes the sparkling juice from me, taking a sip.

“You should go to Ellie’s engagement party tomorrow,” she says. “I don’t want her to think I’m stealing away her brother.”

“I’ll be there as long as I’d be there if you weren’t around,” I say. “She’s used to me leaving for work.”

“I don’t want to make you lie to your sister either.”

“Don’t worry about Ellie,” I say, leaning over to kiss her. Her tongue flicks over her bottom lip like she can taste the wine. “She’s a strong woman. She’s beendealing with a self-absorbed brother for most of her life.”

“I’d love to meet her.”

I look over at my glass of wine. I catch her scrutinizing me. I’m usually much better at being a manipulative asshole than this.

“Oh, I don’t think you two could handle each other,” I say. “Besides, I don’t want the two of you trading stories about what a pain in the ass I am.”

She keeps looking at me, looking for the creases and twitches that indicate I’m avoiding. I keep my expression passive, taking another swig of my wine. Most people don’t look this closely at me. They’re either too intimidated.

But someday the show must end, and Farah will find out that Ellie is the one who was burned in her fire. She’ll be furious that I didn’t tell her. The right move is to end this now, but my brain can only strategize how to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

It still grates in my brain. Ellie has been my last remaining family member for a long time and the only living person I’ve cared about. I never put anyone above her.

Now, there's Farah and the twins. She's fallen so far from my priorities that I've forfeited any right to call myself loyal.

A soft chime plays from the hotel room while my phone also sends me a notification.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“The dessert’s here,” I say. “Don’t move.”

“Is that another command?”

“It’s a reminder that your clothes are wet and you’d need to cross through the room to get a new set.” I give her a quick kiss while the squeeze to her thigh lasts a little longer. Our mouths linger close to each other. “If the room service attendant sees you, I know he’ll want you, and I’ll want to toss him over this balcony.”

I quickly step down the wooden stairs around the jacuzzi and head to the door. The attendant pushes in a cart with whipped cream, chocolate-dipped strawberries, and a molten lava cake. I tip him and he steps back out.

I carry the tray over to Farah. With the glass walls of the jacuzzi and the recessed lights inside it, her legs and ass are visible under the water.

I’ll have to figure out how to perform oral on her underwater. I can picture her arms clinging to the sides and her legs floating on the water as I push her over the edge and have to hold onto her to stop her from drowning.

I set down the tray on a platform beside the tub. Farah half-swims over. She catches me watching her chest and gives me a half-hearted shove.

“Get back in here,” she says. “I’m not going to get pruny alone.”

I drop in, grabbing around her like I need to stabilize myself. I kiss the side of her head as she uses the spoon to slather the whipped cream on a strawberry. She bites



into it, her eyes lighting up as the taste hits her.

“Good?” I ask.

“I’m considering naming one of the babies Strawberry after this,” she says. “Christ.”

She dips in another strawberry and offers it to me. I shake my head.

“I don’t like sweets,” I say.

“What? Why did you get all of this then?”

“For you.”

She frowns. “Just try it. It’s amazing.”

“It’s for you.”

Glaring at me, she swipes two fingers in the whipped cream and presses it against her lips. She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Do you still not like sweets?” she asks.

I grin, slowly leaning forward, and kiss her. The warmth of her mouth seems to deepen the flavor of the whipped cream. I kiss her some more, taking every whipped particle from her until all I taste is her.

“Maybe I can be converted,” I say. “It might be faster if you’d placed it a bit lower.”

“I don’t think you want to drink the chlorine in the water.”

“I’d die with a smile on my face.”

She rolls her eyes, but her hand curves around the back of my neck, bringing me closer. She kisses me deep, more confident than I’ve ever seen her. I smile against her mouth.

“You should eat the lava cake before it gets cold.”

“You want to interrupt what we’re doing?” she laughs.

“I won’t get cold,” I say. “I’ll never be cold for you.”

She looks at me with a warmth in her eyes that seems almost too delicate to be in this world. It certainly isn’t something that should normally be around me, but I’ll take care of it for as long as I can.

When she tries the lava cake, she lets out a soft moan that almost makes me jealous. I run my hand down her back, over her ass. I give it a small squeeze.

I move my hands back up, following the curve of her ribs before exploring her breasts. She presses her back against my chest, licking melted chocolate off her fingers. My breath hits against her ear. She turns to look at me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“I could go with you to the engagement party,” she says.

I stop. With other people, I’d think someone was trying to manipulate me—softening me before asking for what they want—but Farah isn’t like that. She also doesn’t know that I can’t have her at the party.

“I know I’m not invited, and I know I could be recognized, but it’d be cool to meet your sister.”

“Why are you so interested in meeting Ellie?” I ask.

She shrugs, but the look in her face starts to harden. “She’s someone you care a lot about. If you care about them, I care about them.”

“You’ll be overwhelmed,” I say. “I’d rather not scare you away that quickly. Ellie will be overwhelmed with everything. You two can meet at another party.”

“Do you go to a lot?”

“When I want to. With you, I’ve just been enjoying our private moments.”

I kiss her again, but even as she kisses back, the change is noticeable. There’s a distance between us even as we’re skin-to-skin.

I’ll make it up to her. With the way she feels, it’ll be the kind of night where the everyday moments slip away. Like chlorinated water. Like clothes. Like a lie.

## Chapter seventeen

~FARAH~

It's a strange kind of comfort, waking up in a hotel room that costs more per night than my old building's rent combined.

Maybe it's not just the price tag that feels bittersweet.

Maybe it's the fact that I've gone from clawing my way through hell to sinking into sheets that feel like heaven—knowing full well clouds don't hold forever. Sooner or later, they break. And when they do, you fall. Hard.

I roll over and freeze. Kieran's side of the bed is empty.

My hand slides across the sheets, still faintly warm, like he was just here. I try to talk myself down—he could be out running, handling business, anything—but it feels too familiar. Too expected.

Men like him hunt what they want. Acquire it.

And when they've stripped it for value, they walk away and leave the rest to rot.

If Ellie is his sister, why is he trying so hard to stop me from meeting her? How foolish would I be to not consider that he's the type to keep a few women in his bed? What do I possibly have to keep him satisfied when he could have any other woman in any city? Crippling self-doubt and a childish need for validation?

The door separating the bedroom from the rest of the hotel suite opens. Kieran carries in a mug with a thin ribbon of steam swaying above it. The questions shrouding my thoughts fade as I look at him. Even in the early morning, he looks like a propaganda

ad for becoming a lumberjack. Rugged without lookinggrimy. Stunning without looking superficial or delicate.

“I thought you’d left,” I say.

“I did. I went downstairs. The restaurant has this coffee with blood orange and grapefruit mixed into it. They’re known for it throughout the country. It seemed like something you’d like, but you can spit it out if you hate it.”

I take the mug from him. The warm ceramic feels nice compared to the faint chill in the room. After we’d had sex twice in the night, it’d been unbearably hot. We’d still stayed close together, our sweat-stained skin constantly finding each other, but I must have used up all of the heat in my body because it feels like it dropped thirty degrees.

“What time is it?” I ask, looking around for a clock. I glance back at him when he doesn’t answer. He’s gazing at me with a softness that could almost be mistaken as adoration. He blinks and checks his phone.

“9:24,” he says, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

“Wow. I never sleep that late.”

“We were busy last night.”

“Sure, but you didn’t sleep in.”

“I wanted to make sure my work was finished, so when we restart our marathon, I can give all of myself to you,” he says.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I smile, the thought already heating up my chilled skin. But the smile falters.

“The party’s today,” I say.

He shrugs. “It’ll be quick. Maybe I’ll give Ellie some whipped cream, so she and Henry will want to kick us all out and make their own desserts out of each other.”

I take a sip from the coffee. The contrasts of flavors trigger all parts of my brain, almost calming me until my brain starts going into overdrive again.

“That would be a fun engagement gift,” I say. “You should start heading back. I need some time to get cleaned up, maybe get a massage after last night. My legs feel like I ran a marathon.”

“As long as you’re ready for tonight,” he says. “I’ll leave my card for you. Get the massage. I ordered some room service, which should be here soon. I’ll try to get back before two. If we don’t get naked too quickly, I can make reservations somewhere. How do you feel about Italian? Or French?”

“I’ve never had French food,” I admit. “I do like Italian.”

“I’ll have some French food delivered here for lunch. We’ll go to the new Italian place for dinner. If we’re dressed.”

He gives me a quick kiss, then seems to think better of it, and leans down for a longer kiss. The steam from the coffee curls under our jaws, and as his mouth opens my mouth, I can almost taste the coffee wafting off the mug.

When he pulls away, he takes his wallet out of his pocket and takes out a gold and black credit card, setting it on the nightstand. As I glance over at it, the light glints off what looks like a diamond in the right corner.

“Buy yourself whatever you want,” he says. “It doesn’t have a limit.”

“Maybe I’ll have to repay you by not having limits either,” I tease.

He groans, his 5 o’clock shadow rubbing against my cheek as he kisses next to my ear.

“I could make Ellie wait,” he says. “And you could put your money where your mouth is.”

“That’s not the only place I could put my mouth,” I whisper.

He pulls back, his pupils slightly dilated and his lips parted as he gazes at me. Lust radiates off him, but if I was naive, I could almost say there was something more there. Something more permanent.

I can’t let myself think that.

I whip off the duvet. With my hand still on the edge of it, he straddles me. He hurriedly pulls off his pants and boxer briefs. His hand grips his erection with an ease that speaks to experience. I can barely take another breath before he thrusts inside me.

My legs pull up as he grips my shoulder to stop me from moving too much against the Egyptian cotton. I press my knees against his ribcage. The zipper of his pants chafes against the inside of my thighs, but it only adds to the sensations that threaten to turn me into confetti.

He buries his face against the curve of my neck, moving slower now, letting his body drag against my clit in a way that makes me arch my back and press harder against him. We're turning into one body, chasing after the same thing.

Kieran pulls himself up, looking down at me. His dark eyes—those ones that look like the most radiant mahogany that nature could create—mix with his spicy, warm scent, and I could imagine us in some forest, forsaken by humans and making love in a way that only two people can do when everything else has crumbled away.

My breath quickens. Kieran's hand cups around my breast, squeezing it lightly. His tongue rolls over my nipple before his hot breath hits the wetness, nearly taking me completely over the edge.

"Farah," he murmurs, kissing under my throat. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I swear he's ready to tell me something, but the moment slips away as he starts to accelerate his thrusts.

I brace my hands against the headboard to keep from slamming my head into it. He grabs one, drags it down, and presses it between us—right where he's driving into me. My fingers slip along his cock, soaked and thick, while the heel of my hand grinds against my clit.

The friction is overwhelming.

It's a perfect storm.

My head lurches back, barely tapping the headboard as the orgasm crashes into me. I must look possessed as my whole body seizes, because every inch of me vanishes into the pleasure pulling me under.

Kieran doesn't stop. He pulls out just long enough to flip me over, hands rough but



careful as he drags my hips up and into place.

His hand comes down and smacks my ass—sharp, stinging, a filthy punctuation that makes me gasp.

He thrusts back into me with a force that knocks the breath from my lungs.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“Fuck—Farah,” he grits out, voice low and wrecked.

His grip tightens on my waist, holding me in place as he drives into me. The sound of skin meeting skin is dizzying—matched only by his uneven, labored breathing.

“Christ,” he mutters, the word guttural and lost in his throat as he pounds harder, faster.

He groans, sharp and raw, and with one last thrust, he comes—every muscle pulled tight as he buries himself deep.

He rocks into me once. Twice. Slower now, like he’s wringing every last pulse of pleasure from his body.

A low, wrecked sound escapes his throat—sated and rough—before he finally pulls out.

Then stillness. The crackling silence of aftermath.

He collapses over me, hand sliding down my side, and pulling me into him as he lays down next to me.

Even as I start to relax beside him, it takes me a moment to remember to exhale. When I catch Kieran’s eye, a surprised laugh bubbles out of me. His mouth curves, his eyes crinkling as a low chuckle rumbles from his chest. He leans in, brushing a kiss against the spot where my head met the headboard.

“You good?” he murmurs. “Didn’t mean to have you bouncing off the damn furniture.”

“I’d be mad if you hadn’t,” I say, breathless but grinning.

He gives me one last look before easing off the bed. He grabs his pants, tugging them back up over his hips and zipping them with one sharp motion. Then his hand slips into his pocket to check his phone, his chest still rising and falling like he hasn’t quite caught his breath yet.

“I’m sorry, Farah, but I need to get to the house. I need to make sure that security is there,” he says. “I’ll have to shower at home. Thank you for being so goddamn tempting.”

He kisses me—on the lips, on the corner of my lips, and on my cheek.

“I hope you know that you’re not off the hook,” he says. “I’ll want you again when I come back.”

“I hope so,” I say. “How else will I know what to do with my hands?”

He smirks at me before leaving the room. I listen to the suite’s door open and close. I lean back, hitting my head against the headboard again. I close my eyes.

I could trust him. I could accept that Ellie is his sister and he just doesn’t want us to meet during her engagement party.

Or I could take out enough money with his card to run so far he’ll never be able to find me again.

But neither of those two options is the kind of person I am anymore.

After ten minutes have passed, I pick up the hotel phone and ask the front desk to call me a taxi. They offer me one of their drivers instead, which I accept.

I know that no matter what, the truth is going to rip me apart. But I'd rather be dissected by my own hand than be surprised by the knife later.

When the hotel driver drops me off, I nearly don't recognize the mansion. Even the gate has been decorated with cerulean ribbon and purple, white, and blue periwinkle flowers. Even the last bits of snow are gone. It's like his cold, empty mansion has been turned into a fairytale castle.

At the very least, Kieran genuinely loves her.

It's such a shocking change that I nearly trip over my feet when I see two men standing at the entrance, wearing all black and holstered guns. One of them raises his eye at me.

"Are you on the guest list, ma'am?" he asks. "This is a private party."

"I know," I say. "For Ellie. Um, I'm friends with Kieran. I've been living here."

"Is that right?" he asks, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Why weren't you in the house then?"

"We were at a hotel. He must have showed up here about fifteen minutes before I did."

The two men exchange looks. I let out a slow breath.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“Can you get Kieran?” I ask. “He can tell you that I’m telling the truth.”

“Right,” one of the men says. He claps his partner on the shoulder. “I’ll go see if I can find him. Keep an eye on her.”

He takes quick strides away. The other man turns to a couple who have walked up to the mansion. They show him their licenses before being allowed inside. He opens the gate to allow them in. I peek past them. The front yard has been filled with tables and chairs, covered in cloth that alternates between purple, white, and blue. Periwinkle petals create pathways and heart shapes on the lawn. Catering staff walk around with their trays, offering food and champagne to passing guests.

The guests are dressed in fashionable coats and pants. I’d taken the white coat and boots that Kieran had given me, which makes me almost look as wealthy as everyone here, but the mix of wonderment on my face and the sweatpants give away that I’m inadequate in comparison to everyone else.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice calls out. I turn toward it. “You were asking about my brother?”

The woman is beautiful. She has long blonde hair that flows behind her like a veil. She’s thin to the point of almost appearing sickly, but her face has a glow that makes it indisputable that she’s one of the healthiest people here.

“Hi,” I say brightly. “I’m so sorry that I’m party crashing. I just wanted to talk to you about—”

My breath catches as she stops in front of me. I hadn't noticed when she was farther away, but faint scars pull at her skin near her left eye and along her hairline. My eyes search her face, recognition hitting me harder than any fist could have. Helena Porter.

Recognition must hit her at the same time, as the glow vanishes, her face turning a stark white and her jaw drops. The security guard looks between us, uncertain.

"Ma'am?" the man asks Helena.

It snaps Helena out of her shock. She jerks her shoulders back, raising her chin.

"You have some nerve coming here," she says. "Did you come to finish the job? Do you want to burn down my engagement party too?"

"I didn't... I didn't know," I say.

"You should get fucked," she snarls. "Get out of here. I'm calling the police."

Some more guests who'd just arrived stop, watching us. One of them has a young girl, who clings to her gold necklace. I place my hand over my abdomen like the twins need to be protected from this criticism.

This is what I deserve.

"I—please don't do that." I raise my hands in defenselessness. "I don't under—I don't know what's going on either."

She pulls out her phone as the people around us whisper. They use hushed voices, but from how they're hovering, they don't mind being seen as spectators of this train wreck.

My hand sinks into my pocket. I feel the rough edges of the compass. I'd run away after sleeping with Kieran because I'd wanted to experience more life. And I did. But just like I thought, I can't stay in Heaven because I don't belong here. I cause problems. I cause fires. I ruin lives.

"Ellie!" Kieran grabs onto Helena's arm. "Stop. Let's talk inside."

Ellie. It's a nickname.

Holy shit.

I carefully look over at him. He must have been running over because his breath is coming out a little harder than normal. How did I become so familiar with his face? His breathing?

Yet I couldn't tell when he was hiding the most important secret from me.

Helena—Ellie—looks over at him, her mouth open as she's about to explain something, but she stops and studies his face as well.

"You knew," she accuses. "Why? Why is she here? You wanted me to be the one to send her to the police? Did you think that was some kind of engagement gift?"

"Let's just go inside," Kieran says. He indicates to me. "Come on, Farah."

"I'm not going anywhere," Ellie spits out. "You can explain righthere."

"Then I'm just taking Farah. Don't call the police. I'll deal with this."

He grabs my arm, pulling me past the gates and the guests, who have turned into an audience, watching as Kieran takes me through them, heading inside the mansion.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I should stop. I should dig in my heels and run for the hills before the police get here. I should claw at his eyes for letting me be so blind to his true intentions.

It's my fault. If I learned anything from my father and my brother, it's that people will convince you that they're doing what's best for you while hiding their true motives.

As we step into the foyer, I'm relieved to see nobody is inside. Kieran locks the doors behind us. He puts his hand on the small of my back, leading me into the den.

I stop in front of an armchair, but I don't sit down. He stays near the bookshelves.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

"You're going to demand answers out of me?" I snap, but I don't look at him. "You hid the fact that you're the brother of the woman—that you're Helena Porter's brother."

"I'll explain why I hid that from you when you explain how such a good, empathetic woman could start a fire in a building with people inside it," he says. "Don't tell me it's only because you were fired from your job."

I dig my nails into the armrest of the chair. "It was nearly midnight. The store should have been empty."

In his silence, his rage is palpable. Like the rising heat when a fire is right outside the door.



“You’re not even going to take responsibility?” he hisses. “You’re going to blame my sister that she was at a store at midnight? She’d been working during their usual hours. She and Bettiol agreed to meet later to get her late mother’s ring resized.”

My throat clenches. The news reports had mentioned that Helena and Bettiol were there that late over a special customization, but they hadn’t mentioned it was for her deceased mother’s ring.

“It’s not like that,” I say. “That’s not what I mean at all.”

“Explain it.”

I rub my forehead. “I already told you that I didn’t do it, and you didn’t believe me.”

“When did you ever allow my perceptions to affect your feelings?” he asks. “It doesn’t sound like the woman who broke through my door and didn’t take the chance to run away. But you ran away from that fire that you claim you didn’t start.”

“I only showed up because—I’m not innocent,” I restart. “But the person who started the fire called me. He didn’t tell me what he did, but I was worried, so I went there. I had no idea people were inside.”

“You’re not close enough to anyone for that to be true,” he says. “You forget that I did an intense amount of research into you when I was looking for you. You don’t have any friends. You don’t talk to your parents. Your only roommate has been—”

He stops. My heart pounds in my chest.

“Kieran—” I start.

“Your only roommate has been your brother,” he finishes. “Are you fucking kidding

me? That piece of shit?”

I turn to look at him. He’s gripping onto a bronze globe on the bookshelf. I’m wary of him throwing it. I know he won’t throw it at me, but I’m prepared for the chaos of a man’s rage.

“It’s not his fault. He—”

“If you excuse it over his drug use, I swear to God—”

“I called him. I called Neal,” I cut in. “I told him about how I was fired. Mr. Bettiol was regularly asking me to work off the clock. I confronted him about it. He fired me and told me that if I tried to report him for violating labor laws, he’d tell everyone that I’d been stealing from him the whole time I’d been working there. I was upset. I left a voicemail for Neal, venting to him about it. A couple of hours later, I got a voicemail back from him about how he was going to confront Mr. Bettiol. I tried to call him back to stop him from doing anything—”

I stop, my eyes burning and a thickness in my throat. I take several breaths. He watches me. His hand relaxes on the globe, and his expression softens, but he doesn’t move toward me. I don’t know why I want him to.

I take one more deep breath before forcing myself to continue.

“Neal is temperamental. I don’t know if it’s the drug use, mental illness, or brain damage from the abuse, but he is. Maybe on some level, I called him because I knew the old Neal—the big brother who’d do anything to protect me—would come out and do whatever it took to make me feel better. But when I heard his voicemail and how angry he was, I knew I’d made a mistake. I got over to the store as quickly as I could, but it was already in flames. I ran in to get Neal out. That was when Mr. Bettiol saw me, and I knew I’d be a suspect. Neal told me that we needed to go separate ways.

That's when we—when I crashed into you.”

Kieran appraises me. His arms cross over his chest. The hand on top switches back and forth between a fist and open.

“So, Neal left you in another bad position,” he says.

“It's not Neal's fault.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“It is. You’re blinded by your ideals about loyalty to someone who doesn’t have any loyalty to you.”

I let out a slow breath through my nose. “Kieran, you can’t go after him.”

“I’d rather cut out my own tongue than let him walk free,” Kieran says, his lip curling up in distaste. “If he was inside the store, then he knew people were inside. I’m also going to be fully aware of what I do to him.”

He turns away, heading out of the den. I lurch over to him, grabbing his arm.

“You can’t go after him. You have to forgive him,” I plead.

He stares at me. “That’s the thing you don’t understand, Farah. I don’t have to do anything. But I’m going to. I’m going to burn him until I’m satisfied that he knows what it feels like.”

“You won’t even leave him alone for me?” I ask.

Our eyes lock, the flickering, foliage green against the unrelenting timber brown.

“No,” he says. “I won’t.”

He tries to get past me, but I pull myself in front of him, quickly heading toward the doors. As soon as I’m outside, I take off running.

I need to get to Neal before Kieran reaches him. Again and again, I do the same thing

to Neal. I let him take the punches from our father because I was too afraid of pain. I let him take the emotional burden of being fired from my job because I was too weak to carry it myself.

I've led violence right to his door again. I thought I'd been falling in love with a man when he was always a wolf, one who only wanted to sharpen his teeth before going in for the kill.

As the cab rushes to my brother's apartment, all the ways this could end spiral in my mind, and they're all terrifying.

Kieran and Neal are on a collision course, one that can only end with scraping metal and broken bones. One or both of them will go to prison. Kieran already sees me as an enemy, and Neal will soon feel the same way.

I've burned my bridges while I'm still standing in the center of them.

I grip tightly onto my arms, staring out through the windshield like I'll be able to see into the future and come up with the perfect scheme to avoid disaster.

The only strategies that appear are turning myself in to the police or running for the border.

The driver looks back at me, an uncertain expression tensing his face. I must look like I'm about to do something dangerous—because I am, when I'm planning to throw myself in between two men who would rather die than give up an inch.

I shove my hands into my pockets, trying to relax my shoulders and look like I'm only headed back home, but it feels like the exact opposite. In my right pocket, I feel Kieran's credit card, my thumb brushing against the diamond in the corner of it.

Diamonds represent so many things: wealth, resilience, commitment, invaluable worth. All qualities I've never had.

I thought, at the very least, I could say I was loyal. I thought I was committed to Neal and resilient against the struggles that seemed to swallow us whole.

But a stranger broke down my walls so easily and got me to confess to Neal's sin that loyalty may as well be an imaginary concept like time travel or getting my life together.

After the driver stops, I hesitate to pay with Kieran's credit card. I use it, but I vow to pay him back for it. I'm not going to owe him anything. I'll cut all ties between us like he's a frayed part of my jeans.

Running up the stairs to Neal's apartment, I make a checklist of things we'll need to do to prepare to be on the run.

We'll grab his clothes and shove them in a bag.

If he has any money in the bank, we'll get it out.

We'll get some hair dye and some fake glasses. Kieran could have called his connections to the police already, so we'll need to be more invisible than I was the first time I fled Chicago.

We'll need to separate to lessen our chance of being recognized. I won't tell Neal right away. I didn't take him with me the first time because I knew he couldn't handle the changes, but we don't have a choice this time. I'll give him time to adjust, then tell him I need to leave.

Maybe that's not the right choice. I know better than anyone that getting comfortable

with someone and losing them is worse than never knowing them. I know Kieran will haunt me for the next decade. I can only hope he'll fade after that.

I knock on the door, but it sounds so fumbled, I wouldn't blame Neal for thinking it's someone drunkenly stumbling against the door.

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I knock again, trying to sound more intentional.

The door opens. I take a deep breath, ready to give Neal my itinerary, but it's not Neal at the door.

Samson, with his long hair and lanky body, stares out at me. I can't imagine how he's survived so long as a drug dealer. It seems like other drug dealers will terrorize him for looking less dangerous than them.

Maybe the fact that he's survived that world while looking forgettable should scare me more.

"Where's Neal?" I ask.

"Your bro is here." He cranes his head to look down the hallway, his eyes darting toward the stairways. "Your man that is friends with Delgado—he ain't here, is he?"

I look down the hallway, almost half-expecting Kieran to arrive. But he wouldn't be coming here to save me. He'd be coming to burn Neal alive.

It seems like a bad idea to leave now. A worse idea to stay.

But now Neal has the threat of Samson and the threat of Kieran stalking around him, and I can't leave him with that.

"Can I come in?" I ask.



“Your man made it clear that if I fucked around with you, he’d send Delgado after me. I’d rather not be slowly decapitated while I’m still breathing.”

“I won’t tell him,” I say. “I swear.”

“You can send your swears up your ass.”

“Farah?” Neal’s voice comes from inside the apartment. His hand appears on the door, and he opens it wider. His hair is sticking up in dramatic angles, and deeper shadows are under his eyes, but he appears unharmed. “Samson, we should let her in. That guy is rich. She can get money from him.”

“I’m not letting her in,” Samson huffs. “Christ, it’s like you want Delgado to get me. Do you want that, Neal? You think you can eliminate your debt by eliminating me?”

“If you don’t get the money, the cartel is coming for you. Just let her in,” Neal says. “She won’t tell that guy. You know my word is good.”

“Your word is shit.”

But Samson steps away from the door.

I step inside, but Samson barely moves, putting us uncomfortably close to each other. After I close the door, the air feels thicker inside. I avoid Samson’s eyes, looking over at Neal.

“Are you good?” I ask. He nods but gives half of an attempt at a smile.

“So, you gonna get me this money?” Samson asks. “This buddy of Delgado’s? I’m adding even more interest now because your man put a threat on my head. A grand.”

“A thousand dollars?” I ask. “That’s—that’s not going to happen.”

“Call him,” Samson demands. “He’s sweet on you. He’ll give it to you.”

Two things settle in my mind like rocks in mud:

Kieran would give me the money. Standing back here with Samson, I remember Kieran’s rage at him grabbing me. But more than that, I can reach into the memory and feel that the rage was fueled by fear. He’d seen a threat to me and reacted.

Just like he’d reacted to Neal when he saw him as a threat to me.

The other thing is that I’m not going to call Kieran.

I’m not going to do it because I love him.

As damnable as it is, I love him too much to involve him anyfurther.

A smaller pebble settles next to this one: this is exactly how Neal should have felt about me. He shouldn’t have asked Samson to let me in. He should have told Samson to keep me out of their business.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“I can’t call him,” I say. “But we can find another way. I’ll get you the money over time, and I’ll add on even more interest. I just need some time. If you—”

“No,” Samson says. “I’ve run out of time, which means you and your bro have run out of time. I get the money tonight, or I start carving into your brother like Thanksgiving turkey. Call your man and tell him to give you the money.”

“No.”

Samson swings out. I flinch, but he doesn’t hit me. His fist hits the small TV on the dresser. As it crashes down, Samson reaches for one of the top drawers on the dresser, yanking it out and slamming it on the floor. He picks it up again and smashes it against the mirror hanging on the wall.

Neal launches forward, trying to yank the drawer out of Samson’s hands, but Samson doesn’t let go. They glare at each other over a drawer filled with underwear and packets of gum.

“Do not threaten my sister,” Neal hisses. “Just go. I’ll get her to come around.”

Samson narrows his eyes, the edge of his lips curling up to show his teeth. Silent seconds pass. Samson’s shoulders slowly lower, and he opens both of his hands, letting the drawer drop. Neal’s underwear tumbles out.

“Fine,” he says. “But you know the price if you fail.”

Samson winks at me before lumbering to the door. As he leaves, he slams the door

shut.

I should be terrified of Samson's threat dangling over us, but Neal's intervention felt like a step back in time, when he would have walked through hell to protect me from our father's rage.

I grab onto him, hugging him tightly.

"Thank you," I say. "I've missed you."

"I've been right here." He smiles at me as I pull away. "You're the one who left. But he's right. If he doesn't get the money, some bad people are coming after him. And if I don't give him the money, he's coming after me."

"We could leave. Get out of the city. We may need to any—"

"No, Farah." He combs his fingers through his hair. "Running isn't going to help. You can just ask that guy for money, can't you? That money is nothing to someone like him. It's a penny. Less than a penny."

I shove my hands in my pockets again, my fingers curling around Kieran's credit card.

"I don't want to owe him," I say.

"Do you want me to owe Samson? Because that's the kind of loan you can't default on."

I look away from him. So, he wasn't leading me out of hell. He just wanted to soften the blow when I made a deal with the devil.

He's not the brother he used to be. I should know we can't go back to who we once were.

"Will you go to rehab after this?" I ask.

"Of course," he says, putting the drawer back into the dresser. It scrapes loudly as he shoves it in. It doesn't escape me that he doesn't look me in the eye. He picks up his scattered underwear and packets of gum.

"Kieran and I were fighting about not being honest with each other," I say. "I found out his sister was Helena Porter."

Neal's head jerks up. "What? Isn't his last name different than that?"

"They're foster siblings."

"Hm."

Neal returns to collecting his things and dumping them in the drawer. He's strangely methodical for someone who has a half-full milk carton sitting on top of a laptop, which lies on top of a pizza box, which lies on top of a binder with the label taxes? It's a tower of disorderliness, and he's rolling up his underwear to press into the edges of a drawer.

"I feel like I lost someone important," I admit.

"You'll find someone else," he says.

It's meant as a reassurance, but as the words permeate the barriers in my mind, I'm even more certain that I won't find anyone else. There could be other men in my future, but they'd just be filling up space. They'd be temporary distractions.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“Do you think about the fire?” I ask. “About Helena?”

He closes the drawer and twists the knobs on the drawer like he’s testing their tightness. “I think it’s better to leave the past in the past.”

“It seems like the past is chasing us down,” I say. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing. Maybe we should take responsibility for our choices.”

“Farah, you are torturing yourself.” Neal glances at me but quickly turns to open up the next drawer and starts rolling up his socks. “It’s... it’s not great that woman was there that night, but collateral damage happens. It’s your boss’s fault. If he hadn’t been treating you like shit, this wouldn’t have happened. Sometimes, when you’re taking care of family, your hands get dirty. And I got my hands dirty for you. That was me taking responsibility.”

I look over at the mirror, which has a long crack in it now. One shard of it slightly juts out, but I imagine it could stay like that forever—broken but held together by habit.

I need to leave the city.

I can’t keep saving Neal, and I don’t want to be in a city that has Kieran’s fingerprints all over it—the roads remind me of our night driving when we left the hospital. The foliage reminds me of having sex in his car at the Astasio Botanical Garden. Any sight of the skyscrapers reminds me of the view of the city from the hotel balcony.

Even this parking lot reminds me of how he’d protected me from Samson.

I check out the window. No sign of Kieran yet, but I know it can't be long. At most, he's waiting for his moment to leave Helena's engagement party after I ruined it.

"Kieran may be coming after you," I say. "He knows about the fire."

Neal straightens up. "What? How? You told him? Why the fuck would you do that?"

"He figured it out on his own."

"Bullshit," he snaps. "What? You were angry at me? You wanted him on your side to keep that piggy bank open? What is it, Farah? Am I not suffering enough for you? Do you want me to overdose so you can run away with your Prince Charming?"

His face is scrunched up in rage, making him look much older. He doesn't look anything like my brother. His words should make me lash out like him, but seeing how much he's changed, it just feels like freedom. My foundation has vanished from underneath my feet, and I don't mind free-falling.

"Get some help, Neal," I say.

As I turn away, I let out a slow breath. I open the door and step into the hallway. As I walk away, I put my hands back into my pocket. In the left pocket, I run my fingers over the edges of the compass.

I may be falling, but I'll find where I'm meant to be when I get back on my feet.

Chapter eighteen

~KIERAN~

Ellie looks at me from my armchair in the library, her eyes slightly narrowed like

she's trying to gauge if I'm making excuses or if I'm so full of shit that I wouldn't be able to dig myself out of it with an excavator.

"You seem certain she's telling the truth about her brother," she says.

"She carried the burden of the fire, even when it started to break her. She's not the type to pass off responsibility."

"Anybody would pass off responsibility if they saw you coming after them. You're like a bear on meth when you're being protective." She pauses. "But you did nail her window shut and lock her in a room while threatening to send the whole police force after her, so it appears that threats don't work on her. Why did she admit it now?"

"I filled in the blanks. If she kept up the act, I would've known she was lying."

She leans forward. She'd taken down one of the mini replicas of Henry's buildings, and it sits in front of her. She peers through the windows, so close that her eyelashes must touch the wood.

"You know I didn't do any of this to hurt you," I say. "When I found out she was pregnant, I just couldn't punish the twins—"

"Your twins."

I rub my jaw. "But I didn't want to reward her in any way. I wanted her to suffer for what she did to you. I don't know what happened."

She sits up straight again. "It's strange. I almost feel sympathetic. Not for you, who, at this point, is bordering on a new level of foolishness, but for her brother."

My hand slips off my jaw. "What? Neal is a piece of shit. He's the one who—he's the



arsonist. You nearly just attacked Farah for the same thing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“I’m also more sympathetic toward her too.” She shrugs. “She took me by surprise, and the only thing I knew about her was that she—well, I thought that she set the fire. Actually, maybe that’s right. I’m sympathetic toward Farah. It’s you that should be sympathetic to the brother.”

“Are you having an aneurysm? How much have you had to drink so far?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m sober. Almost sober. Moderately sober. But you’re the one whose mind is clouded. Think about it. You kidnapped a pregnant woman to get revenge for me. You went so far as to imprison her in a room and threaten her with blackmail. Why did you do that? Because you wanted justice for me. Her brother tried to burn down a building for Farah being unfairly fired. I’m not excusing him, but I understand having a brother who is rash and cares more about revenge than what his sister wants.”

“That is complete bullshit,” I say. “I didn’t endanger anyone else.”

“I don’t think it’s as noble as you think it is to say that you hurt someone you cared about over a stranger.”

She stands up. “I still think he should go to prison, of course. And I sure as hell don’t want him at my engagement party. But now that you’ve told me all that, I get it. Seeing you talk about her also made me realize something. I’ve been fearful of marriage for a long time because I thought a man would leave me as soon as my looks faded. I loved Henry, but I didn’t completely trust him. Even getting my mom’s ring adjusted, I kept putting it off and told Bettiol to meet me so late because I thought he’d refuse to do it. I wanted a sign to tell me to bail. But Henry loved me

even with my burned skin. Since that night, I've been certain that I'm going to spend every night with him until one of us dies." she takes a deep sigh. "We're runners, Kieran. We hate commitment because of our childhoods. But even if this woman isn't the one, I hope you find that kind of love someday. But with the way you talked about her, I think she is the one. You don't want the flames to be right outside your door and realize that you've been delaying the best days of your life."

I look down at the mini replica. Henry usually worked on massive five-star hotels and resorts, but this one is a house. Their future house.

It means something to construct a world where your partner will be safe, and a place that they can return to. The outside can be in flames, and all you need is to be the lap for her head to rest on.

Whether the fire comes or not, one day we'll all be ash. I'm going to be certain that I'll spend every night with Farah until one of us dies.

In folklore, mongooses and venomous snakes are supposed to be archenemies—but that's not really true. Snakes are just snakes, dangerous to anything that gets too close. Mongooses don't go looking for fights. They're fast enough to dodge a strike and wired to resist venom, but it's not some dramatic rivalry. They're just trying to protect their space, their young. Tearing a snake apart is just instinct.

That's what I'm thinking about when Neal opens the door and sees me standing there. His body tenses like he's coiling up, and I swear I can almost hear a hiss in the back of his throat.

"She said you'd show up," he says. "I'll give you this—you're a punctual killer."

He's weirdly calm. Almost like he's given up.

“I’m not the one who tried to burn someone alive,” I say. “But I could be, depending on how this goes.”

His eyes go wide, then settle back into that bored, deadpan expression.

“I can stay out here in the hallway,” I add. “But I’d rather talk about your crimes inside.”

“And why would I invite Death into my living room?”

“It’s usually smart to stay on Death’s good side,” I say, rolling my shoulder as he flinches. “We can’t stop fate. But we can dull the blow when it hits.”

“We could also just steal fate’s hammer.”

I give him a tight smile. “A nice thought. And we both know how fate deals with nice thoughts.”

He makes a noise low in his throat, then steps aside to let me in. As I walk past, he stiffens even more, and something old and primal kicks up inside me—the instinct to neutralize a threat.

I take a breath and sit on the couch. The mirror’s cracked. Wasn’t the last time I was here. Back then I was offering him pills in exchange for his sister’s location. He folded fast—too fast to be a snake. Just a shell. Shedded skin. A ghost of who he used to be.

Exactly how Farah sees him.

“I’m here to ask you to turn yourself in,” I say. “For Farah’s sake.”

He leans against his dresser, which is oddly placed in the middle of the hallway. Two splinters of wood are near his feet. It makes me think of tinder for a fire. It makes me think of when Farah demolished my door to escape, but she never left. Not until now.

“Farah is fine,” he says. “I know you think you’re some weird-ass guardian, but I’ve been her guardian much longer than you.”

“If this is you being her guardian, then I’d hate to see what it looks like when you’re trying to sabotage her.”

He lurches forward. I don’t move, except for my hand clenching and imagining his throat inside it. He stops right in front of me, his breath smelling like old, damp clothes.

“Where do you get off judging me over my relationship with my sister?” he hisses. “You’re just some fucker who wanted a body to jack off with. I know her better than you ever will, and I’ll be by her side long after she forgets your name.”

I don’t respond. Just look at him. And eventually, the fight drains out of his face, his shoulders sagging like a crumpled tent. It’s a miracle no one’s killed him yet.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

He's got Farah's eyes—same hazel-green—but where hers are wild and full of life, his are just... dim. Like hospital walls.

"If you knew her so well, you'd know that letting her throw her life away for you is a cruelty that should never be forgiven," I take a breath.

"My whole life, I believed the world was built to crush you. That the only way to survive it was to get strong enough to push back. My parents were addicts. I bounced through foster homes. My sister died in a senseless tragedy. I bled, fought, and clawed through life for every inch of power I could get. And then I met Farah."

I pause. The lump in my throat threatens to close off the rest.

"She didn't carry a grudge. She didn't fight the world. She didn't try to cheat it. She just found beauty wherever it could be found. A deer in my backyard. A sprained ankle and a climbing wall. A locked door that she picked just to prove she could."

I glance at him.

"She'll love anyone through their worst mistakes. You know that better than anyone. But so do I."

He bows his head, looking down at his feet. His jaw moves slowly as he works through whatever storm's brewing behind his eyes.

"I know," he says quietly. "That's why I believe she'll survive. She's different from us. She finds joy in all the places we don't."

A snake will bask in the world's sunlight, but as soon as it gets dark, it's nowhere to be seen. It may be a kindness to the world if I threw him out the window.

I take a deep breath. "I get why you started the fire. I understand how protectiveness curdles into something violent. Neal, Farah sees some part of you that was the brother who protected her from your father. Because she loves that part in you, it's taken every speck of compassion in me to see you that way too. Under the lens, I understand you don't want to go to prison—specifically because you believe one day you'll turn back into that brother again too, and once you're that man, you won't be able to protect Farah if you're in prison. But time isn't going to stall for you. She's terrified of being arrested now. This isn't protecting her. You need to let her go."

He squeezes his eyes shut. His fingers pinch at the bridge of his nose, but his movements are so careless that he's almost holding his eyelids shut.

"Neal," I say.

His shoulders slump, and he lowers his hand. His eyes are red, but for once, it's not from the drugs.

"You love her," he says.

I pause, but I can't start lying now when her freedom is on the line. "Yes."

"If I go... if I turn myself in, you'll watch out for her."

"I won't let anything bad happen to her."

I stand up. He watches me carefully, but he's no longer getting ready to rear back to strike.

“Okay,” he allows. He offers me his hand. I shake it.

It’s surprisingly warm for a snake.

“I also need you to call Robert Dunn about the Amygdalai deal—make sure the acquisition’s still on track. And reach out to James Paisley about Quadrant Cloud. He hasn’t responded to the updated terms, and I need to know if I should start applying pressure,” I tell my assistant, Sophie Tomlinson. She’s already skimming her phone, typing each instruction as I speak. “Confirm that Calamandrei’s is still handling the lunches here, and check that Stephen’s fully prepared for the presentation. If he’s not completely confident, have Alison go over it with him. Also, send flowers to Paul for the birth of his child. Something cheerful but not loud. Include one of those luxury plush toys and a soft blanket.”

“Of course,” she says, glancing up briefly. “I didn’t realize you were close with Paul.”

“I’m not.”

“Oh.” She pauses, fingers hovering. “You’ve only ever sent flowers for first babies. This is... a very generous gesture.”

I stop in front of my desk, where my laptop pings with incoming emails. The idea of my employees having children feels different now that I’m going to be a father. The only difference is that the police—and the top four private investigators in Chicago—aren’t searching for the mothers of their children. Farah’s gotten good at disappearing. All that’s left of her is how vividly she still lives in my mind.

It’s only been two days, but I’ve barely slept. I’ve been glued to the search, and it already feels like weeks. I’d still be at it, but I needed to reset my brain. Lately, every neuron is screaming worst-case scenarios instead of offering strategies for finding



her. I needed to shift out of panic mode and back into execution. The most effective solution was to return to work—where logic is my weapon, and my mind is what's made me impossible to beat in this industry.

It's helping. But now I need to contact Bandit.

Bandit's a black hat hacker who once breached several major corporations—and came dangerously close to slipping into ours. He got cocky. That mistake let me trace him. In exchange for not turning him over to law enforcement, he offered me access to a few of his programs—one of which can scrape every photo and video uploaded to social media and identify people caught in the background.

If it ever got out that I'd used it, my reputation would take a major hit. I'd be labeled a stalker, dragged through a PR nightmare, and slapped with lawsuits that could cost millions.

But if it helps me find her?

It would be worth it.

I need to be certain that she's safe.

"I just got a notification from Peter," Sophie says. "A woman is here trying to drop off your credit card. She's claiming she found it, but he's detained her. Do you want him to call the police?"

I guess I won't have to use Bandit after all.

"Tell him to bring her up," I say. "She's not a thief, but don't let her leave."

"Got it." Sophie types in her phone, heading out of the office and to her desk without looking up.

I look around my office. It's too late to make it look less cold and uninviting. It is what it is.

As I wait, I can already imagine all of the strategies Farah could come up with to avoid Peter bringing her up to me. Dodging under his arms to run for the door. Stomping on his black Oxfords. Trying to convince him that someone more dangerous is trying to break into the building.

She's a gust of wind that I'm trying to capture in my hands. I'm just as irrational as any other storm chaser.

Peter's telltale knock raps against the door.

"It's open," I answer, standing up.

The door opens slowly. Half of Peter appears first, indicating for his apparent thief to step inside with a stiff arm.

Farah steps inside, her lips pressed together tightly and her shoulders hunched. She still looks like the morning light when it filters through the trees. It's more than the honey-blond hair and the green eyes. It's a softness that's all-consuming. A presence can be gentle as it touches you—and blind you if you take it for granted.

"Hey," I say.

She nods back at me. "Hey."

Peter closes the door. Silence rises around us like smoke.

"You don't need to leave," I start.

"I'm just here to drop off your card. I'll pay you back for the cab rides when I can." She glances around the office. She's unimpressed by the leather armchairs and the bookshelf filled with old leather-bound books. The view of the city catches her interest for two or three seconds, but when she looks back at me, the view may as well have been a field of deadcows.

"Farah—"

"Here," she says, stepping forward and holding out the card. I don't reach for it.

"I meant you don't need to leave the city," I say.

“I’m not staying with you. And the police are still looking for me.”

“They’re not,” I tell her. “Neal turned himself in.”

She stops. Her eyes search my eyes as anxiety tightens her face. “What? Why?”

I step closer to her. “Because he needed to take responsibility for his actions.”

Her eyes narrow.

“What did you do?” she demands. “Did you threaten him again?”

“No. He opened his eyes and realized what you deserve.”

She moves closer to me, still dissecting me as she approaches.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“He wouldn’t make that choice,” she says firmly. “I may have been blind to it before, but I know it now. He wouldn’t do that for me. What did you do? He can’t survive in prison.”

She stops a few inches away from me. Her hands are trembling. I reach down to take them, but she jerks them away.

“I would’ve turned myself in before I let him go to jail,” she says. “When did this happen? Who do I need to call? I’ll take his place.”

“It’s too late, Farah,” I say, reaching toward her again. She steps back. “He showed them the burn scars. He told them details only he would know.”

“I’ll tell them those same details.”

“Do you know which accelerant he used? Where he started the fire?” I ask. “I don’t imagine your brother was very talkative about those details. This was for you, Farah. For your freedom.”

“Fuck you,” she says, quiet but biting. “You get to kidnap me to avenge your sister, but I don’t get to protect my brother? How does that make sense? You act like you care about me, but this is the worst betrayal you could’ve done to me. This is my family, Kieran. You couldn’t even tell me—”

She throws my credit card at me. I grab her arm before she can pull it back. I pull her close enough that her chest is pressed against my chest. Her eyes are burning green flames.

“You can question my motives for many things,” I say, the words coming out like they were scraped out of my throat. “But I’m not acting like I care about you. I care about you more than I’ve ever cared about anybody. That’s why I talked to your brother. I can help him through the legal process. You can still talk to him. This doesn’t need to be the end of anything.”

Her face reflects a kaleidoscope of emotions, her mouth stiffening and quivering, and her eyes tensing then getting damp in a way that makes my chest clench.

“You have to believe me,” I say.

“I can’t.”

She jerks out of my grasp, moving toward the door.

“Stay away from my brother,” she says. “And stay away from me.”

She grabs the door handle, swinging it open and leaving so quickly that I can still feel her body heat as the door closes. I look out at the view of the city, trying to think of nothing. The sky is getting dark, despite the morning hour.

The problem with chasing after a storm isn’t the threat of a tornado picking up your car and hurling you into another county.

It’s that you’ll always be chasing it.

It’s outstretching your hand to touch wild winds—and feeling them dissipate until the only thing left in the eye of the storm is a credit card.

Chapter nineteen

~FARAH~

“This whole thing is lame,” Layla says, dragging out the last word for emphasis. She leans against the counter and grimaces, wiping the traces of water off her arm. The breakroom counter is usually covered in crumbs and dried spots of coffee, but I’d just wiped it off, and water droplets still cling to the laminate. “What kind of asshole calls us in to work on a Saturday night?”

“I don’t mind,” I admit. “It’s a shotgun wedding—how often do we get to cater for that?”

“It’s a hotel, Farah. You can do it every other weekend.” She rolls her eyes. “At least these people will be saving some money on the wedding so they can pay for the divorce lawyer later.”

“So, no wedding bells in the future?” I ask.

“Oh, I will have at least three weddings.” She grins. “There is nothing more romantic than a wedding registry and guilt-tripping your family and friends into buying you new sets of knives.”

I laugh, but I stop as a memory captures my attention—Kieran grasping my hand as he uses his pocketknife to cut me out of my seatbelt after our crash.

The most insignificant details have reminded me of him for the last month. Whenever I drink coffee, I think of him bringing me coffee in the hotel bedroom. When I see something with natural beauty, I think about how he joined me to watch the deer. The sight of any kind of bandage reminds me of being with him at the hospital. The glow of lights at night reminds me of our drive through the city.

Even my bare mattress in my small apartment reminds me of when we had sex in his

personal gym.

It's ruthless that someone who spent so little time in my life eclipses everything else in it.

“Farah?” Layla asks. I snap my smile back on.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“Sorry. Just haven’t been sleeping well,” I say.

“I’d offer some alternative medicines, but with your two passengers...” She indicates my abdomen. “I’ll just advise some chamomile tea.”

I touch my stomach, spreading my fingers out to give the twins equal attention. Out of all of the small towns, I decided to restart my life in Crested Owl because it sounded whimsical, and I needed whimsical a month ago. It’s significantly less charming than it seemed, but I’ll make it work. I don’t have any other choice. Matt hired me despite knowing I was fired from my last job and spent almost three months unemployed, so he must have been desperate—and it may be a long time before I find another employer like that.

It is also possible he knows that I saw him snorting cocaine, but either way, I caught lightning in a bottle, and I’d be a fool to let it go solely because the town constantly smells like burnt rubber.

Layla opens the refrigerator and shakes her head. “Ugh, I brought a salad I bought at the store, but I don’t think I can do that on the weekend. Do you want to go to Reggie’s?”

“I’m tight on cash right now.” I shrug. “I already had a snack anyway.”

She groans, her knees bending like a heavy weight was placed on her shoulders. “No wonder you don’t mind working today. I’m gonna go. I’ll bring you back a cookie or something. God may want me to suffer this weekend, but I’m going to suffer with a bacon and ham sub.”

As she leaves, my thoughts of Kieran return with a vengeance. Layla pieced together that I was hung up on a man, and she'd told me to sleep with someone else to get over him, but every time I think about it, it makes me feel emptier. It's the difference between pretending to eat and eating a perfect combination of comfort and gourmet food.

My phone rings. Layla must have gotten in her car and realized she'd forgotten something.

But I check the number, and it's not one of my contacts.

My finger hovers over the button that will silence the ringing, but it's Chicago's area code.

Could Kieran have found my number without Neal's help? Should I be happy or angry about that?

Kieran intervened in one of the most private parts of my life. It's still hard for me to breathe when I think about Neal in prison and that he's been ignoring my phone calls, but with time and distance, I know that Kieran didn't intervene out of bad intent.

We've all made choices that put us on the top of a pin, trying to balance and not get punctured.

"Hello?" I answer as the phone is about to switch to voicemail.

"Farah?"

Not Kieran. It takes me several seconds to place the voice.

"Neal?" I ask. I reach for a chair, pulling it out to sit down. "I'm so glad you called

back. I've been worried."

I grip tighter onto my phone. I'm relieved to hear from him, but I'd forgotten how a conversation with Neal could twist and turn into anything.

"I'm sorry, Farah. They have rules here about phones. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Of course, I get it. It's not like you can—" I stop. The phone hadn't asked me if I'd accept a call from the prison. "Are you still in prison?"

"Prison?" he asks, confusion curling in his voice. "Oh, right. No. I didn't—I didn't serve any prison time. I thought Kieran would have been you about everything."

"Why would he explain everything instead of my brother?" I ask. "I'd called four or fivedays after you turned yourself in. You must have checked your phone, or else you wouldn't have this number."

"He hasn't told you anything?" he asks.

"Neal, I told Kieran to fuck off," I say. "But that isn't important. Why didn't you—where are you that they have rules about phones?"

He groans. "I'm sorry, Farah. I didn't know how to talk to you after everything. When I got your call, I told myself I'd call you back after everything was settled and I wasn't going through withdrawal. I... I needed to deal with my own consequences, and I didn't want you to have to deal with any of it. I should have called. But after Kieran's lawyers managed to get the deal, I went straight into rehab, and they don't allow us to use a phone for a month."

"Rehab?" I ask. "You didn't spend any time in prison?"

“Yeah, I have no idea how he did it either,” Neal says. “But from what I’d overheard, Kieran greased a lot of palms and offered a fair amount of favors. In the future, he and I may be sharing a prison cell together and we’ll have our battle to the death, but for now, I’m... I’m doing good. I haven’t been able to say that for a long time. I need to thank you for that.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with you getting into rehab,” I say softly.

“You were the one who kept trying to push me toward it. And you were the one who convinced Kieran to give me the time of day. It’s why I’m so surprised he hasn’t talked to you about any of it. I get it now—I’d feel the same way if he’d done to you what I did to Helena.”

## Page 68

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

My grip has loosened on my phone. I lean against it, listening to the steady breaths of my brother. I thought I couldn't get the old version of him back, and maybe I can't, but just like I was renewed after my car crash with Kieran, Neal can become new after he hit rock bottom—and I'll love him with the same intensity, but differently.

We continue to talk, accepting our past ghosts and anticipating our future. After I hang up, with Neal promising to call me back next week, I find myself looking at the crumbs under the breakroom's cabinets. It reminds me of when I broke through Kieran's door and the splinters of wood I'd left behind.

I told myself I didn't leave that day because I wanted to find out how he'd tracked me down. But I wanted him to always be able to find me.

Just like I'll always go back to find him.

Chapter twenty

~KIERAN~

I crumple the sandpaper and run my hand over the plank. The deep hue of the wood looks good enough that I may not need to apply a stain.

As I rub my hand over my jaw, my latest callouses scratch my skin. Some scruff has grown in as well, a recurring problem now that I can't find the capacity to give a shit about anything.

I peer out the window. The three deer are still in the yard. It's different from being in

my mansion, where the view of the deer is usually from the second floor. Even on the first floor of the mansion, the deer stayed near the creek on the other side of the yard. These deer graze on the clover I planted, only raising their heads to give me a look of bewilderment that I'm still inside the house three weeks later.

When I bought this house, it was only to trick Farah into coming to me. Neal told me about the cleaning service that paid her under the table, and when I arranged for her to work here, I relished in the idea of her shock and fear.

But I saw her, and it changed me.

It wasn't just the aggression—I felt her in my bloodstream, like something electric. She made the world sharper, louder, more alive. Suddenly I could hear music in the city noise, see beauty in everything that moved. I still grasp those things, but it's much less interesting now. With Farah, I could enjoy the wonders of the world, but it feels empty now to see them without her.

I dream of her every night. Sometimes, it's a simple dinner or unpacking boxes together. Sometimes, my mouth is on the nape of her neck as we lie in bed before my hand moves down her spine and to the small of her back.

I should resent the reminders, but sometimes I drink too much to fall asleep early and visit her.

I lean the plank of wood against the wall with the others. I head back into the kitchen, where Ellie had left some muffins she'd bought. With no insulation after I'd torn down some walls, the sound of the plastic snapping as I open the container seems to fill the house. I take out a muffin and bite into it. A bit dry, but the blueberries add an edge of sweetness that helps me to finish it quickly.

A car pulls up to the house. It's from that ridesharing company, EnginePeer, with its

telltale logo of a V8 engine with two large white eyes and a puff of blue smoke trailing behind it.

When she steps out from the back, fumbling to pay the man, it's a rush.

She's so ethereal, I must have fallen back asleep and the exhaustion is making her painfully real. The softwaves of her hair sway and collide with her nervous but playful movements. Her body moves in a similar way. It's a lightning strike between sensual and endearing.

I'd take cardiac arrest and chronic pain for a single moment of holding that lightning.

When I go to the door, I'm certain by the time my eyes are on the driveway again, she'll be gone. But as I step out to the porch, she's still there.

As the car drives away, she turns and sees me.

She's springtime after a winter that stretched for years. When she smiles at me, it's like seeing green shoots push through frozen ground—proof that something beautiful survived.

“Hey,” I say. I need to memorize that smile and slip it in my pocket for safekeeping.

“Hey.”

“How did you know to come here?” I ask.

“I stopped at your house. Your staff told me you were here,” she says. “I didn't think you actually bought this house.”

“It'd been foreclosed. I'd planned on getting rid of it, but—” I stop. “Farah, I

shouldn't have made decisions behind your back. I should have given you a chance to talk to Neal first. I don't regret talking to Neal because it means you're free, but I should have been a better man about it."

"Kieran." She nervously runs her hand over the strap of her bag. "I should be the one apologizing. Even at the time, I understood why you did it without telling me, and it was my brother's responsibility to reach out to me before he turned himself in. I wanted to punish you more than I wanted my brother to face punishment, and I know now that it's because I was clinging to this idea that I could save him. I thought I could say or do the right thing and he'd be the brother I once knew. I needed to be a martyr to feel like I was a good person, and you saw the flaws in that. You saw more than that in me."

She's stepped up so close to me that when the wind passes through, her hair tickles my arms. The faint scent of jasmine hooks around me, bringing me back to our first night together.

"How are you?" I ask, scrutinizing her face to see any trace of exhaustion or illness. There's a trace of tiredness in her eyes, but she looks healthy. Happy.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“I’ve missed you,” she says. “It’s very annoying to miss someone.”

“I agree. We both have some things to make up for.” I indicate to the house. “Come inside. I want to show you around.”

When she takes a step forward, I take her hand. As I lead her up to the house, she stops. I turn and see her staring at the deer.

“Wow,” she says. “Are they always around?”

“I planted some clover for them. I thought you might like them around.”

Her brow furrows. “For me?”

“For you and the twins.” I tug on her hand and she continues to follow me to the house. I open the door and gesture inside. She steps in, her eyes looking over the bare bones of the structure. “You told me you wanted the kids to go to a public school. When I looked into good public schools, this was one of the best ones. The town has a low crime rate. This house has three bedrooms for you and the twins. I understand that you didn’t want me around, but I needed you and the twins to live in a house that I was sure was safe. I needed you to be happy.”

She grasps my face, kissing me deeply. All the numbness that had built up in me over the last month implodes, sending sensations through me that run deeper than an ocean.

My hand curves around under her jaw. As her mouth opens, kissing me, it pushes

down my fingers enough that I feel the flutter of her pulse.

Our hands move, shedding clothes like leaves off a tree in autumn, while our legs stumble toward the other rooms. The backs of her feet and my toes hit against the settee against the curved bay window, which looks over wildflowers growing in the yard.

When we're down to our underwear, we stumble onto the settee. My thumbs hook on her panties, pulling them down as her hot breath leaves faint condensation on the curve of my neck. Her hands fumble as she tries to get my briefs off, and I take the moment to relearn the map of her body.

I press kisses down the path of her clavicle, over the fullness of her breasts, down her abdomen, across the slight curve of her belly, with a slight swell from where the twins are growing. And I know there's nothing in this world I want more. Not just her. Not just us. But them. The two miracles that held us together through our storm. I already love them more than I know how to say.

She twitches when my tongue drags down the crease of her thigh. Then I taste her.

I let my tongue slip inside. Her hips buck upward, colliding against my mouth, but I press my tongue even harder against her sweetness, the tip of my tongue brushing against her clit before plunging back inside her.

This is what tongue muscles are meant for—her fingers gripping onto my hair, her body rising like it's possessed, and vibrations moving from her pussy to her throat.

“God, Jesus, Christ,” she gasps, voice wrecked and beautiful. She's half-praying, half-blaspheming, and I fucking love that I'm the one who makes her lose herself like this. I'd had a plan to be romantic and take her slowly, drive her to a limit that she didn't know she had, but I can't stand it any longer.

I rise over her. The settee is small, my frame barely fitting on it with her between my legs, but I'm not in the mood to be cautious. Her right knee hangs over the edge, so when I push into her, I feel it jerk up against my ribs.

Motherfucker. Her walls squeeze me, wet and hot and fucking perfect, and I swear—nirvana isn't this good. She must feel the vibrations of the sound that comes out of me as she wraps around me, pulling me so possessively that I'd swear she was jealous of anything outside of us, and I understand because I feel the same.

Our hips brush against each other as I press into her slowly, keeping my eyes on her. Her lips are slightly parted as she looks back at me and her brow is pushed together like she's taken back by the moment. As I pull out, her breath seems to leave her. I could watch her forever like this, a woman taken into the flame of desire. She's moving through the fire and becoming part of it, and I'd do that for her every moment of every day.

Her hands grip my shoulders like I'm the only thing anchoring her to the earth. My body locks over hers, forearms caging her in, and I watch her as I roll my hips into her, slow at first, grinding against that sweet spot inside her. As I thrust into her harder, her nails sink into my arm. I cup my hands around her head, the strands of her hair falling between my fingers. Her head arches backward, exposing her neck in a way that I can't help but lean down and leave my mark on it.

Her hand presses against the window, the heat from her hand creating an outline of steam around it. From the noises she's making, I know she's close and I'm barely clinging to any semblance of control.

I ram so hard into her that her head and shoulders curve up against the wall and we're slipping. It's a reckless abandon. Her hands cling onto the cushion. Dust rises up around us and the sun is streaming through the window, causing a glow against her face.

When I come, it knocks us off the settee. I catch myself on my knee fast enough to catch her around the waist and hold her on top of me, so I don't crush her. Her back is still arched, her hair flowing over her shoulders as her pussy convulses around me, her orgasm so strong that it pulls me into it and makes mine rise even higher.

As I try to catch my breath, her body slowly loosens. I move my hands from her waist to her hips and down her thighs. She looks so gorgeous, I'd still believe it was a dream if it hadn't been more than my imagination was capable of.

"I'm so in love with you," I say. Her eyes crinkle as she looks down at me.

"I know," she says. "I guess it's okay because I'm in love with you too."

I kiss her, a vow to keep her safe, to keep her loved, to keep her forever.

Everybody in this building needs to be fired. Everybody with a stethoscope deserves to choke on it.

"I need someone to do their fucking job," I say. "Why are we even here if you're not helping her?"

"Sir, we can escort you out of this room if it's necessary," Dr. Carrington says. She's a younger obstetrician, but her hair is a shade of blonde that almost makes it look white.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“It’s necessary for you and your team to be half-decent at your jobs,” I snap. “What the fuck is going on? I wouldn’t have chosen your team if you weren’t supposed to be the best in the state.”

In the reflection of the window, I can see that I look like a mad scientist. My hair is spiked up from sweat, my jaw clenched, and my eyes unnaturally wide. My tie hangs so loosely from my neck, it’s ready to slip off. I know I should be a calming presence for Farah, but seeing her in pain is like walking into the sun.

“Breathe, Kieran,” Farah says through gritted teeth. She tries to smile, but the tension around her mouth only makes me hold her hand tighter. Her nails dig into the back of my hand.

I kiss her cheek. “I’m supposed to be saying that to you.”

I’d bought her silk pajamas for today, and it sticks to her skin. I peel the material away from her chest, but it wilts back to where it was.

“Mr. Ragdon,” Dr. Carrington starts.

“You need to give her better medications,” I demand.

“Sir, she elected to not go with the epidural—”

“Kieran.” Farah reaches up, touching my cheek. “This is how I want it. I’m okay. I promise.”

“Do you need anything?” I ask, my voice tight with urgency. “Another blanket? Silk or cashmere? I can roll one into a pillow if you want. We can change the playlist—maybe jazz was a terrible idea. Should I put on The Weeknd? Lana Del Rey? Something you actually like?”

“I just need you to be here and not get kicked out of the room for being an asshole to everyone,” she says.

“I’m not trying to stress you out,” I say, running my fingers through her hair. “I just hate to see you this way. I need to—I don’t like being unable to do anything. Do you remember our time in Saint Barthélemy? The heat of the water and the waves. The water was so clear and you were so happy. I wish we were there.”

“It was a great vacation,” she agrees. “But I think the difference between then and now is that we end up with two babies after this.”

“We could go back and make even more. Three or four.”

“Ugh. Not my favorite thought right now.”

Her hairline is sweat-stained, redness splotching her skin, and her lips pale, but she’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

She’s everything good—like morning light made into a woman. I spent so long trying to protect her without getting in the way, but the anxiety in this hospital has me falling back into old habits. I feel like I’m casting a shadow over her again.

“You ready, Farah?” Dr. Carrington asks. “It’s just some pushing and you’ll get to meet your son and daughter.”

“I’m ready,” she says, looking at me. She grasps my hand, her fingertips pressing so

hard into the back of my hand that the skin turns white under her grip.

I'd let her break both of my hands if it would take away an ounce of her pain. But since it's not an option, I press a kiss on her knuckles. I give myself to her, knowing that when this is over, we'll have two more sunbeams to bring in the new day.

I get why they call it labor—and a miracle worker.

I've never heard so much swearing—and only 70% of it was from me.

Farah and I have a private conference with each other through the bars of her hospital bed, gritted teeth and on the brink of sanity as we convince each other the pain is worth it.

Olivia is born first, coming relatively quickly and crying out with lungs so strong that everything else is drowned out. When she's handed to me, it's the feeling that my heart was taken out of my chest and put inside this tiny, adorable baby. It's my heart becoming reborn too.

Her twin is more reluctant to enter the new stage of his life.

"Maybe we shouldn't have named him Neal," I tease. Farah tugs on my tie, and it finally comes loose, falling on her abdomen.

"You agreed to the name," she accuses.

"I still do," I say. Neal and I have a long road to making peace, but I hope someday we can call each other friends. He was her protector when she needed one—and if Farah wanted to name our son after him, that felt right to me. She leans into it as I kiss her forehead. Our arms wrap around each other, with our hands knotting together as Neal finally enters the world.

As I hold him, I let out a slow breath. The world settles under my feet, and I know this is all I'll ever need.

I kiss Farah. Our daughter nuzzles against her chest while my son sinks deeper into my arms. I know that my anxiety will return and I'll find every way to protect my family, but for now, I let their radiance take ownership of me. I let my shadow fade away in their glow.



### Chapter twenty-one

~FARAH~

“I’m just saying the mattresses are unnecessary.” I look down at my palm, which is still a bit raw from rock climbing. “I haven’t been pregnant for almost seven months now.”

“I don’t want you to fall onto the hard floor, whether you’re pregnant or not.” His hand reaches over, his fingers sliding between mine. He’s so much larger than me that my hand almost disappears under his. Instead of feeling suffocating, it feels safe, like a promise of security.

Kieran glances toward the backseat. It’s out of habit, but the twins are with Ellie tonight. I can still imagine them back there, secured in their car seats. Olivia would be fast asleep while Neal’s eyes widened over every building. When I’d look back at him, his eyes would light up as he smiled. I’d stick my tongue out at him, and he’d laugh. My chest aches with how much I love them both.

If I call Ellie in four minutes, at least ten minutes will have passed since the last time I called her, which is a little less psychotic than calling now.

I turn forward again. “I’m in a harness. I won’t fall on the floor.”

“You tripped on a flat parking lot yesterday,” he says. “Early in our relationship, you sprained your ankle. I love and trust your mind, but your luck and dexterity need to exist in a padded room. Or on several mattresses.”

“Oh, you think I don’t have dexterity?” I tease, reaching over and resting my hand on his thigh. It twitches closer to me. “You don’t think my hands are skilled?”

“You can be as clumsy with me as you want,” he says, smiling at me. And the way he looks at me—it’s like he’s giving me permission to be exactly who I am. Like I don’t have to brace for the worst. Under his light, I feel like I could glow bright enough to turn this cold Chicago night into a beach day in LA.

I tuck my hair behind my ears. Most of it falls right back in front of my face. I consider tying it up into a messy bun, but the gala we’re heading to is in honor of Kieran for his monumental donation to Astasio Botanical Garden. The \$9 million was a nod to the day of my birth, and the \$11 million—because I was born in November—went to Intertwined Skies, a group that helps kids in abusive situations. I considered talking him out of it, but telling someone not to donate to abused kids felt pretty awful. At least it made me feel less spoiled than last year, when he gave me a Mercedes, built an addition onto our rural home so I’d have a home office after finishing my training to advocate for vulnerable children—and surprised me with a birthday trip to Mykonos.

I’d told him about feeling like it was too much, and this seemed to be his compromise.

I’d told him once that all the extravagant gifts made me feel overwhelmed—and this felt like his answer to that.

As he parks in front of the fountain, I’m hit by a rush of memory—of blood racing and something catching fire inside me that’s still burning now.

It’s wild to me that I still get that same feeling every time he touches me.

I don’t need to reach into the past for proof of what we are. I used to spend so much

time wishing Neal could be someone he used to be. But with Kieran, I'm fully here. There's no need to time-travel. What we have now is better than any memory.

As we get out of the car, we gravitate toward each other, our hands and shoulders brushing against one another before he takes my hand. The dress I'm wearing was made to reflect the botanical garden—a white lace dress with yellow, periwinkle, and dark blue flowers that start small on the top half of the dress and get larger as they tumble down the skirt. Stems curl and twist down the length of it and form the straps, which are faintly obscured by lace with a pattern that looks like baby's breath.

When Kieran kisses my shoulder, it sends a warm shiver down me. I grip his hand tighter, and we head toward the conservatory.

The conservatory is massive. I hadn't noticed it when we first came here because it was dark, but it's impossible to ignore as we get closer. It resembles an old Victorian house, but it's much larger, and it's almost entirely made of glass. If it's meant to be a greenhouse for plants, the plants inside it must be monstrous.

"Should I call Ellie now?" I ask. "It might be too loud to call her from inside."

"Let's give Ellie at least fifteen minutes," he says. "We'll do a video chat with her and the twins. We can step outside and show them the fountain."

"Oh, good idea." I wrap my arm around his arm, resting my cheek on his bicep. His suit feels softer than silk, while his tie matches my dress—white silk with flowers drifting down to the end of it. "Do you think they miss us?"

"Everybody misses you when you leave," he says, grabbing the door to the conservatory. I put my hand on his arm. The hairs on the back of my neck are raised.

"Are you sure the party is here?" I ask. "Why are all the lights so low? I don't hear

anybody.”

“They’re setting an atmosphere,” he says. “Don’t worry, Farah, if a gang of ecologists decides to attack us, I know how to make a Molotov cocktail.”

“Did they teach that in foster care?” I mutter.

“Yeah, Delgado showed me how to do it at the Rider residence.” He pushes the door open. I step inside with him, but I’m still clinging to his arm.

I stop. Nobody’s here. The faint glow of lights in the floor and the light from the moon filtering through the ceiling only reveal an abandoned information desk and a massive oak tree growing from the center of the conservatory. It almost looks like shimmering cobwebs cling to the branches, but instead of forming a net, they’re dangling toward the floor.

I take a step closer, my fingers still wrapped around Kieran’s, and he lets me tug him forward.

They’re not cobwebs. They’re silver chains. They’re draped over the branches, like tinsel on a Christmas tree. Like someone needed a place to organize fifty or sixty necklaces. A charm hangs from each one of them.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

I reach for one, my foot narrowly missing the beds of lilac flowers that encircle the tree. The charm is an angelfish, but a ring hangs from it as well—a silver band with a diamond encircled by smaller diamonds. Another chain hangs behind it. I run my fingers over it, pulling it closer. The charm is a hot air balloon. The ring is adorned with diamonds around a gold band with a square diamond in the center.

“The angelfish is representing our time scuba diving in the Maldives,” Kieran says. “The hot air balloon is for our time in Château-d'Oex. There's a charm for the Matterhorn on one of these as well.”

“What are the rings for?” I ask, turning around.

Kieran is on one knee. Even with his elbow resting on his leg, his hands are trembling.

“Not a gala for you?” I squeak out.

“No,” he says. “They did want to thank me, and I asked them for the building for the night. They thought it was a fair exchange.”

He takes my hands. It's not just him trembling.

“Farah,” he says. “Even when I tried with every fiber of my being to hate you, I knew I'd ruin myself and everyone in this city just to put that smile on your face—the one where it reaches your cheeks and everyone in the room can see that you're made of something more precious than the rest of us. For a long time, I felt it would be selfish to try to tie down someone like that, but I don't want to tie you down. I'm not asking

this question to take ownership of you or because I want you as my wife—because, God, I do—but because pretending that I don't want to is the biggest lie. I want you, and no matter what happens, I'll always want you. Every charm, every ring on that tree is a piece of us—moments I never want to forget. But now, I want all of it. The fights. The fire. The forever. Will you marry me, Farah?"

The emotions crash down on me, threatening me with their immensity. Colossal, out-of-control emotions have always been a threat to me—they lead to abuse, to addiction, to saying cruel things to loved ones, to following loved ones down the rabbit hole. Numbing down has always been the safer, more sane option.

But with Kieran, I know I'm safe, and the only threat is not throwing myself into the wave. My cheeks feel wet. I don't remember any tears falling.

"I'll marry you," I say. "Every day. Every lifetime."

He lurches up to his feet, grabbing onto me like he might fall without my help, but as he embraces me, his strength is so forceful that I feel it in my bones. He kisses me deeply, his mouth grinding against mine until it softens so much that I kiss him back to feed into that aggression.

The world seems to click into place. It's like it's always been stilted, and this is the first time my feet have been on steady, solid ground.

When he sets me down, he's beaming. I've never seen him so happy.

"Choose a ring," he says, gesturing to the necklace chains. "If you don't find one you love, we'll get one made."

I look over my shoulder. Even with all of the trips, the galas, and the staggering gifts, it's all excess that fades in comparison to our times together when it's just the two of

us.

When I kiss him, it's meant as a brief moment of gratitude, but when he starts to kiss me back, any intentions slip to the back of my mind like his hand slipping over my throat.

His hands move to the small buttons of my dress, unhooking them with surprising ease for how big they are. As soon as it's unbuttoned, the dress pools at my feet, creating a halo of flowers around me.

He offers me his hand. As I take it, stepping away from the dress, his rough callouses contrast against my smoother skin. While his hands will always bring me to life, they also remind me of how they reconstructed our house and cradled our children. It's almost absurd for him to ask me to marry him because his hands are always building our future.

As he kisses me, he pulls me up into his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist. My hands lock behind his neck. He shifts his grip to my ass. I smile against his kiss, our foreheads touching against each other.

I look down. "You're standing in the lilacs."

"They were meant to be jasmine," he says. "It reminded me of you. They were worried it'd choke the tree, so they changed it to lilacs. I don't think they expect to keep them around. It's just for us."

"In that case, put me down, so we can crush the rest of them."

He lowers me down slowly, my hair swinging under me before it falls like a puddle around my head. The lilacs and soil aren't as soft as our sheets, but it's more lush than I expect.

One of the recessed lights is close to my head. As Kieran lies over me, it casts a light on half of his face. It makes me want to make up excuses to touch every inch of him, to see where the light reaches and where I can bring it out of him.

The buttons of his shirt slip out so easily that I'm able to unbutton it with one hand as he plants a row of kisses from my wrist to right above my elbow.

The strapless bra comes off even faster. His hands run over my breasts, kissing the curve of them as they rise and fall with my breath. He gazes at my body like it's the first time he's seen it—like I'm something sacred.

His erection rubs against my hip while he kicks off his shoes. I keep my hand at the back of his neck, despite the urgent throb between my thighs.

His chest muscles flex as he reaches down to pull off his pants. It still catches my breath every time I see him. He's more broad than those pretty boys on TV, but it's the muscle that ripples across his abs and smooths over his chest. It's a man that has the power to do what he wants.

He slides down and kisses my inner thighs, my kneecaps, and the small scar on my calf. He pulls off my heels and kisses the tops of my feet.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

It's ticklish enough that a giggle escapes as he tosses my panties aside. He drapes over me again, his mouth cutting off my laugh, but I'm still smiling, and I can feel his smile too.

His hands slide into my hair, a light grasp on it like he wants to hold it without restraining me.

His face nuzzles against my neck, his warm breath steaming against my skin, as the tip of his cock rubs over my slit. I raise my hips, and he slides one hand under my ass, holding it so tightly that I know I'll find fingerprints in the morning.

When he thrusts into me, the air leaves my lungs.

Pain flashes through me as my body accommodates him, but it's quickly forgotten as his cock strokes against parts of me that have been dormant since we had sex this morning. He keeps my ass raised, his grip still tight on it, as he drives into me.

He presses his mouth against mine, his lips opening my lips. As the warmth of his tongue slips between my teeth, I almost bite it as his body slides against my clit. The scent of lilacs becomes stronger, as if the movements of our bodies are triggering their fragrance, and the contrast as Kieran thrusts into me makes everything more intense.

He starts to slow down. His hand runs over my hip, his eyes following the gesture, filled with admiration. He draws his name from my hip to my ribs as he grinds up against me, the friction against my clit making my fingertips dig into the dirt under the oak tree.

As he moves in me, my breath is caught in my throat, and the only thing keeping me alive is when he presses against my clit with enough pressure that it makes me inhale again. It's a slow torture that I'd beg for again and again.

He pulls my thighs up. There's a small strain, but as his thrusts pick up again, it's forgotten. We've had to be so quiet when having sex with the twins around, but now the sounds of our bodies colliding and the noises coming out of us are impossible to silence.

"I love you," he breathes against my ear. My leg adjusts lightly underneath him, his cock hitting exactly the right spot now.

"I love you," I say. He pulls back to look at me. When I press my fingers against his cheek, traces of dirt are left behind.

I grip onto him, my arm reaching as far as it can around his back as I bury my face in his shoulder, bracing for the rush of pleasure I know is coming.

These sensations are more than tidal waves. And it does. I must have died from the world exploding because my body is overtaken by ascension. I'm outside of my body. I only know I'm a quivering mess on earth because I'm still tied to Kieran, and with one more thrust, I hear him hiss my name before he comes inside me.

Several minutes pass before Kieran settles down beside me. Sweat from his forehead creates a crest over my left breast. I turn to look over at him. His eyes are closed and his breaths are steady, but from the hint of a smile, I know he's still awake.

"I remember when we met," I say. "You told me I came out of nowhere."

"You did," he says, one eye opening. "I believe that even more now."

“I was just lost,” I murmur. “You gave me something solid to hold onto.”

He touches my cheek. “You’ve always been solid. I just made sure you didn’t disappear.”

I rest my head on his chest.

Above me, a ring glints in the light—delicate diamonds shaped like leaves and a blossom in the center.

“That’s the one,” I whisper.

He doesn’t look at the ring. He’s looking at me.

“Yes,” he says softly. “Yes, she is.”

THE END.

Dear reader,

If you’ve made it this far, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I’m so grateful you picked up *Twins for the Enemy*.

This story started with one thought I couldn’t shake: What if you met the right person on the absolute worst night?

To everyone who’s ever left a review after reading one of my stories, I appreciate you. I read all of them (okay, I read them all twice), and they mean the world to me.

If this book made you feel anything, I’d be so grateful if you left a review. It helps new readers find Farah and Kieran’s story, keeps me writing, and keeps my coffee

supply dangerously full.

With love,

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

Vitina

If you're ready for more hot billionaire romance then turn the page.

Also by

Thank you for reading *Twins For The Enemy!* Follow me and don't miss a new release.

If you enjoyed this book you'll love *Protected By My Playboy Billionaire*

I'd do anything for my best friend who's as close as a brother... except keep my hands off his little sister.

When my best friend asks if his sister can move in while he's away on business, I can't refuse.

Elana's been getting threats and he needs to know she's safe.

Not that I'm thrilled.

I'm running a billion dollar company with no time to babysit a college girl.

Only the stunning woman standing in my office isn't the same mousy kid I remember.

Honey-blond hair and lush lips take immediate hold of my senses.

Now I'm stuck safeguarding an off-limits house guest, and my heart is falling faster than my playboy ways.

I promised to protect.

But if this untouched beauty knew the dirty thoughts running on repeat in my mind, she'd run.

I want her in ways that could burn down my penthouse.

And something in her gorgeous green eyes says she's falling for me too.

Her brother was half right when he trusted his best friend.

Because I won't let anyone touch her...except me.

If you're ready for steamy Brother's Best Friend Billionaire romance [CLICK HERE](#)

~ADRIAN~

“Adrian, trust me, you don't want to miss out on this. We're on the brink of something huge, and your investment could skyrocket the returns.”

The owner of a chain of hotels, notorious for clandestine affairs, is desperately trying to lure me into throwing my money down the drain.

“Save the sales pitch for someone who doesn't care about their money, Frank.” I snort.

“It's a golden opportunity! You'd be a fool to pass this up.” I can practically imagine him begging on his knees. Pathetic prick.

“I don’t invest in fairy tales.” I’ve built my empire on discernment, not the wishful thinking of overconfident bastards.

“I can show you the business plan—”

“Convince me with results, not spreadsheets and empty promises. Until then, don’t waste my time.” I hang up abruptly. I’ve had enough of him.

With an aggravated sigh, I lean back into the soft leather seat of the black sedan as it glides through the city streets, the rhythmic hum of the engine muffling the soft music emanating from the speakers. I idly drum my fingers on my thigh as I watch the blurry skyline through the tinted window, impatience seeping into my veins as the familiar impotence of being a passenger washes over me. I meet my driver Mac’s warm eyes in the rearview mirror as he smiles, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Sir, I don’t mind being a passenger, but I’m not sure that’s what you’re paying me for,” he’d quipped with a wry smile after my persistent insistence on taking the wheel the night before.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

Mac has been with me for over a decade. His salt-and-pepper hair, meticulously combed, is all I see now that he's taken his eyes off the rearview mirror and back on the road. As we approach a red light, the sedan slows to a stop, and the music gains clarity. Through the tinted window, the panoramic skyline sharpens into focus, and so do the pedestrians crossing the busy sidewalk, reminding me how mercifully warm the first week of May has been.

As we approach Morgan Investments, I brace myself for the upcoming meeting with Ethan. A call from my best friend had summoned me out of a lunch discussion with potential partners. The urgency in his tone overshadowed the insufferable pair of bland eyes across the table, yammering on about a doomed investment I had no interest in un-dooming. Suddenly, my phone buzzes, and I look down at a text from my PA.

Ethan Turner is here to see you, sir.

I swiftly tap out a response, telling her to let him into my office, and then rest my phone on my thigh. Melissa, a valued member of my team for over two years, stands out in a sea of predecessors who were more interested in navigating my bedroom than managing my affairs. Her competence and professionalism have been a breath of fresh air. Her response is almost immediate as she lets me know it's been done. Good. I seldom grant access to my office, but for Ethan, who has been by my side for most of my conscious life, exceptions abound. In the face of his urgent plea to meet, I'm prepared to offer everything he's ever trusted me with.

The sedan purrs to a stop in front of Morgan Investments as I signal for Mac to pull over.



“Mac, drop me off by the central complex today,” I say, a subtle shift in my usual routine. “Take the time off. I have a car I can take if I need to.”

“Yes, sir.” Mac nods as I open the door and step out.

My brisk strides carry me towards the ensemble of interconnected buildings, all part of Morgan Investment. The exterior is a canvas of glass and steel, each structure seamlessly flowing into the next.

As I approach, the central courtyard comes into view. The restaurant I had insisted on building here sits at the heart of the complex. The floor-to-ceiling windows reflect the flower beds surrounding them. I catch a glimpse of my reflection as I walk by. The sound of water trickling from the fountain in the center mingles with the clinking of cutlery and the faint sound of hushed conversations.

The cafe, bathed in sunlight, beckons with the aroma of coffee. I spot a few familiar faces as I swiftly scan the tables arranged around the side of the fountain. A commotion from one of the tables steals my attention. I narrow my eyes at a young woman, her expression contorted in pain. One hand clutches her mouth, while the other, gripping a book, desperately attempts to salvage the situation as the contents of her mug spill onto the small plate beneath. In reflex, she starts fanning her hand in front of her face and looks around the table. Frantically, she reaches for a handful of napkins, and I watch with subtle amusement as she begins to wipe away the spilled coffee.

The sun highlights the strands of her honey-blond hair, casting a gentle glow around her. She brings her gaze up and looks around nervously; her eyes framed by long lashes are a captivating shade of green that flicker with embarrassment.

My body stiffens. I recognize those eyes. My brows knit together as I mentally scour my past for any trace of where I might have seen her. Nothing surfaces. I open my

eyes to look back at her. The features of her face become clearer once she relaxes her mouth. Her mouth. Lush lips, the shade of a summer rose, draw my gaze for an instant longer than necessary. It triggers a fleeting wonder of what her lips would feel like wrapped around my c—

Fuck, stop. I peel my eyes off her and force myself to keep walking. Could she be... The notion that she might be a new intern flickers in my mind, prompting an instinct to verify.

From the corner of my eye, I spot a face I wish I hadn't.

"Adrian!" My COO calls out after me, but I don't bother stopping. Victoria's recent behavior has left me with little patience for her whims. But as I try to make my way to the main building faster, the insistent clack of heels pursues me. I let out a deep sigh and turn around. Keep it civil and quick.

"Good afternoon, Victoria." I know my tone borders annoyance, but I also know she can take it.

"Ever so formal," she purrs.

"Do I have a reason to be anything but?" I challenge. As brilliant as she is, she's just as insufferable.

"I just wanted to remind you about the exhibition tomorrow night." Her red lips curve into a smile. "I thought you might have changed your mind."

"I haven't." My tone is firm and decisive as I sense her disappointment. "Enjoy the exhibition." Before she can react, I pivot on my heel, continuing my purposeful stride towards the main building. Be a good girl, and don't follow me. Thankfully, she's taken her wits with her today, and the sounds of her heels echo in the

oppositedirection.

As the elevator doors glide open, I step onto the last floor, the familiar territory leading to my office. Melissa greets me with a poised smile. She's put her dark hair in a tight bun today, and it glistens under the natural light coming from the windows.

"Good afternoon, sir. Mr. Turner is waiting for you in your office," she informs me, her voice as composed as her demeanor.

"Thank you, Melissa." I nod. "Have we taken in any new interns recently?"

"No, not besides Bethany," she replies, gesturing towards the young woman at her desk. Bethany looks up from her work, her plump lips part, and she sucks in a breath. She's definitely attractive, and there's a certain sparkle in her eyes that hasn't gone unnoticed. Oh, miss me with that bullshit. Melissa, oblivious to the dynamics at play, continues, "She's been assisting me."

Maybe the girl from earlier isn't an intern. If I bothered learning the names of everyone who works for me, I wouldn't get shit done. I glance over at Bethany, her gaze lingering a beat longer than it should, and I return the look with a hint of a smirk. It's a familiar dance, one I've mastered.

"Mr. Turner and I would like coffee," I tell her, not taking my eyes off hers.

"Of course, Mr. Morgan." Bethany gives me a wide smile that's a little more than friendly. "I'll make sure it's just the way you like it."

"Will you now?" I raise a brow at her and turn to look at Melissa who's clearly glaring at Bethany. "Make sure she doesn't mess it up," I tell Melissa before proceeding to my office. I catch the subtle drop in Bethany's smile from the corner of my eye, prompting a wry grin of satisfaction on my own lips. Good. It's a calculated

act, reminding her of the boundaries.

I swing open the door to my office, and there, sprawled nonchalantly on the brown leather couch, is Ethan. Blond, blue-eyed, and oozing charm, he springs up at my entrance. I can't help but smile at Ethan's infectious energy that has already spilled into the room.

"Adrian, my man!" Ethan exclaims, a grin spreading across his face as he pulls me into a bear hug. "I haven't seen you in ages."

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“It seems it took you that long to miss me.” I push him back playfully, the camaraderie seamlessly picking up where it left off.

“Well, they say absence makes the heart grow fonder.” He settles onto the couch again, throwing an arm behind it.

“How’s the thrilling world of marketing and advertising treating you?” I ask, joining him.

“You won’t believe what came my way, man. It’s a game-changer!” The enthusiasm is clear in his voice.

“Are you going to make me guess?” I raise an eyebrow, genuinely intrigued.

“We’d be here all day.” Ethan chuckles. “I got a phone call from the CBK headquarters.”

“Uh-oh. They finally caught you stealing all the coffee creamer,” I quip. CBK is an advertising giant. I’ve worked with them a few times. Ethan has been climbing the ladder quite fast, thus refusing all my proposals to work for me.

“I don’t steal it. I put it in my coffee.” He flashes a grin. “You’re looking at their new COO.”

“What?” I bark out with a smile.

“That’s right. I’ve been working for this my entire life. One step closer to becoming

CEO.”

“My last remaining chance of luring you into my company has just sailed away.” I lean back and look at him. “Fuck, Ethan, that’s fantastic news! If anyone can whip them into shape, it’s you.” I offer a congratulatory smile. Ethan is one of the best marketing specialists I know. He was able to rescue a few plummeting companies with just his marketing strategies. I’ve been trying to get him to work for me for the past five years, but the fucker won’t budge.

There’s a quick knock on the door as Bethany pokes her head in without waiting for a response.

“Your cof—”

“Out,” I snap, and her eyes widen for a moment before she collects herself and scurries out.

“That’s why I don’t want to work for you.” Ethan snorts, and I look back at him. “What?” He shrugs. “You’re a fucking menace. The second you pull that shit on me, you can expect to have your face rearranged.”

I huff out a laugh. “When do you start?”

“Well, here’s the kicker.” Ethan’s expression shifts to apprehension. “Adrian, I need a favor.”

“Don’t look so nervous, Ethan. You know I’d give up both my arms for you.” I cock my head to the side.

“What about your precious time and privacy?” He curls a brow, a small V forming between them.

“I’m not sure I’m following.” I narrow my eyes. My time and privacy? What’s he getting at?

“I have to leave in a week for LA, where their headquarters are.” He takes a deep breath and looks at me, searching for a reaction. Despite my joy for him, I’m struggling to grasp how I fit into this picture. “Well, say something, damn.”

“You’ll have to move.” I guess, and he nods slowly. I lean back, crossing my arms, “You know, I’ve asked you multiple times if you want to work for me, but you’ve always declined.”

“And I’ll keep declining.” He nods matter-of-factly.

“Mm, afraid the famous Turner charisma wouldn’t survive the atmosphere at Morgan Investments?”

“Oh, please.” Ethan laughs. “I can’t risk getting tired of seeing your stupid face every day.”

“My face happens to be perfectly fine to look at.” I lift my chin.

“Oh, so I’ve seen. Is there a single person in this building that doesn’t want to fuck you?” He gestures playfully towards the door.

“I think Jerry, the security guard, might not be so eager.” I suppress a laugh.

“Well, have you given him an opening?” Ethan laughs again. It doesn’t take a genius to know why women love him so much. He’s one handsome devil, the easiest person to get along with, and there’s a colossal brain beneath all that charm. A moment’s silence falls as his smile fades, and he looks at me. Here we go.

“What is this about, Ethan?” I lean forward.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:54 pm*

“It’s about Elana.” He hesitates, gauging my reaction.

“Elana?” I furrow my brow, trying to recall the last time I saw Ethan’s little sister.

Ethan nods, a somber expression settling over his features. “You know she’s been living with me for a few years now. I can’t leave her alone, Adrian.”

“What do you need me to do?” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

“I need someone to look after her while I’m in LA. And there’s no one I trust more than you, so here I am.”

“Look after her?” My mind races, and for a moment, the thought of having to babysit someone isn’t particularly thrilling. What about your precious time and privacy? Now I understand his question. “Why doesn’t she go with you?”

Ethan sighs. “She’s still in college, and I don’t want to disrupt her life completely. Plus, I thought maybe... you could do something for her here.”

“Like what?” I raise an eyebrow. Set up a playground?

“I don’t know, man.” Ethan shrugs. “Maybe you could take her in as an intern or something. She’s intelligent, you know? Top of her class, and she’s a quick learner. Plus, it could be a good experience for her.”

I run a hand through my hair, processing the unexpected responsibility.

“So, you want me to be her babysitter?” The words come out harsher than I hoped.

“More like a mentor.” Ethan chuckles and then looks up at me. “She’s grown up, Adrian. You don’t have to play dolls with her. Elana’s twenty-one now. She just needs someone to... guide her a bit.”

“I know.” I nod slowly. “Of course, I’ll do it, even if I do have to play dolls with her.” I chuckle back. It’s the least I could do for him.

“Holy shit, really? Adrian, I can’t thank you enough.” Ethan beams at me, gratitude evident in his eyes. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Don’t mention it.” I wave off his thanks, a small smile playing on my lips. “You two are family.”

“You’ll see how much she’s grown up.” He smiles, clapping me on the back. Before I can respond, Ethan reaches for his phone, quickly reading what seems to be a text. “I texted Elana a bit earlier, telling her to come up. She’s been waiting in the cafe in the courtyard. Should be here any minute.”

As he finishes, a knock echoes through my office.

“Yes,” I call out, and Melissa pokes her head in. Bethany could definitely learn a thing or two from her.

“Mr. Morgan, a girl named Elana is here. Should I let her in?”

“Yes.” I give Melissa the go-ahead with a nod.

The door swings open, and in walks the girl with honey-blond hair, green eyes, lush lips, flushed cheeks, and a coffee stain on her blouse. Well, I’ll be fucking damned. Time seems to freeze for a moment as my mind struggles to catch up.

It's fucking her.